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David G. Hartwell and L. W. Currey, *Editors*

The Fantasies of Harlan Ellison

Harlan Ellison with Brett Bather's bronze sculpture of Harlequin and Ticktockman. Photograph by Richard Todd.

The Fantasies of Harlan Ellison

HARLAN ELLISON

With New Foreword by
MICHAEL MOORCOCK
New Introduction by
HARLAN ELLISON
New Afterword by
ROBERT THURSTON

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This is a completely revised photographic reprint of the contents of two collections by Harlan Ellison, *Paingod and Other Delusions,* first published in New York by Pyramid Books in 1965 and reissued in a revised edition (reproduced here) in 1975, and *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream,* first published in New York by Pyramid Books in 1967.

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Harlequin and Ticktockmon sculpture in bronze by Brett Bather.

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Dedication:
To Philip José and Bette Farmer
for 25 years of love and support

Special thanks for assistance in the preparation of this book are extended by the Author to Linda M. Steele, David G. Hartwell, Ann Elizabeth Groban and David Calkins, the last-named of whom was directly responsible for noticing that "Pretty Maggie Moneyeyes" had been rewritten without my permission by unnamed and unknown parties, many times since its first publication, and that *all* versions of that most particular favorite of my stories currently in print—including the version in DEATHBIRD STORIES—are invalid. For the first time in eleven years, Maggie appears as she was originally intended.

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Foreword

IT COULD BE argued that Harlan Ellison possesses the romantic imagination without quite enough of the romantic discipline. Instead he substitutes *performance:* Keep it fast, keep it funny, keep 'em fazed. And this is why in my opinion his work is so uneven, often within the same story. I don't think any other writer pleads his own cases so often or at such length. This phenomenon supports my theory, I think. His stories are usually buried in their own weight of introductions, prefaces, running commentaries because each collection is a set (in the musical sense); this nonfiction is the patter designed to link material for the main numbers. Each story is an act—a performance—and almost has to be judged as a theatrical or musical improvisation around a theme. The idea of working in public, in a shop window, is anathema to me and most other writers—to Harlan Ellison it is a natural extension of his writing methods.

As with jazz, he'll use a rubato technique to catch up on himself, get to his original drift (tune or phrase) often after very long digressions. His best stories are scarcely stories at all: they are images, emotions, characters, collages. They are often at their worst when they try to fit genre conventions and dash themselves to fragments against the edges and walls of the form. "A Boy and His Dog" (1969) is an excellent piece of work and only bad when it tries to become a run-of-the-mill SF story (the underground scenes). "Eggsucker" (the "prequel" written some years later, in 1977) is better because it doesn't try to be anything more than an anecdote (and paradoxically is more of a well-made short story than much of Ellison's work). "Imagist" writers don't need to worry too much about plots—witness Stevenson's best short stories—and can destroy their own conceptions by conscientious attempts to fit them into conventional shapes. This is often the case with Ellison whose plots can distort the "real"

information in his short stories. Ellison's information is no more in his plots than is, say, J. G. Ballard's in his—or Poe's or Sterne's in theirs. The information is in his images, characters, his pyrotechnic highly oral method of *performing* a piece.

Flashes of autobiography, of self-revelation, are usually immediately disguised or obscured (for all he claims to tell us exactly how it is). Trente, he says, in "**Paingod**" (1964), had reached a Now in which he could no longer support his acts. If Trente is Ego naked and at large, we know whose ego he represents. In this story everything works fine while the images are coming—the trip through the universes, the skid row scenes and so on—while the characters are being described—but when we are given "plot" it is a letdown. The story part—a pretty banal statement about there being no pleasure without pain—could easily be discarded without the essence of the piece being harmed at all. How much of this is Ellison's fault and how much the fault of SF magazine editors (most of whom have probably done more to ruin the flowering of imaginative talent than any other single group) is hard to say.

In his introduction to "**'Repent, Harlequin!' Said the Ticktockman**" (1965) he admits the fact that he is always late. (A fact—as someone who's almost always early and an anxiety neurotic who's terrified of missing deadlines—I can vouch for. It is a hideous experience watching Harlan limbering up for a deadline whose date has already passed.) This, too, is a trait more often associated with a performer who needs to give so much of himself to his act that he is always vaguely reluctant to begin until the last possible moment, always exhausted afterwards. I have met more people like Harlan when I've been performing with rock and roll bands than I have met at writers' conferences. It is worth noting, I think, that he has worked as a stand-up comedian and a singer in his time and is always in demand as a speaker when he never fails to give a complete performance. His personal life is much closer to the personal life of, say, Al Jolson than it is to John Updike and I'm sure he prides himself on the fact. He is by no means the only writer to work and live as he does, but he could be one of the first to draw on performing rather than dramatic and literary disciplines to aid him to shape his writing. Byron and Shelley, Swinburne and Rossetti (these two latter are probably better examples) had poetic meter to control and give shape

to their imaginations; similarly a writer like Ballard has chosen to use literary methods to control the flow of his creation. In America there is more of a tradition of what could be called pseudo-oral writing (Twain to Vonnegut) and Harlan Ellison's best work is in this tradition, of course. But films, radio, comic strips have taught him more technique than, I suspect, have books. In this he breaks more thoroughly with tradition than he does in his subject matter which is fairly conventional. He is conscious that he is *competing* with visual forms and so he seeks perpetually for immediacy—for the immediacy offered by popular entertainment, by newspapers, by rock music, by the performers from George Burns to Lenny Bruce whom he so admires. It is no accident that he finds himself spiritually at ease in Hollywood, that he blossoms on a podium, that he takes naturally to TV appearances, that he shows on occasions a somewhat wary attitude to the more staid gatherings of writers and critics where performance is not expected of him.

> High above the third level of the city, he crouched on the humming aluminum-frame platform of the air-boat (foof! air-boat, indeed! swizzleskid is what it was, with a tow-rack jerry-rigged) and stared down at the neat Mondrian arrangement of the buildings.

Harlan Ellison speaks about fifteen languages, all of them English. This gift is derived from a natural relish for words which enables him to make use of them far better than most of his contemporaries. It also enables him to work an audience. If he could produce his stories in front of about 2000 people at Circus Circus, Las Vegas I think he would probably be in his element. The trouble with writing is that it is still a somewhat slow process, still essentially a solitary activity, and Harlan Ellison is still trying to beat those particular problems.

Almost all the characters in these stories are, of course, Harlan Ellison. Harlequin the gadfly is an idealised Ellison, justifying his penchant for practical jokes, giving it a social function (one can also see him as a "good" version of Batman's adversary, The Joker). This particular story is one of the most successful of Ellison's 60s performances, for all that its ending tends to be a trifle ordinary and it reveals, to me at any rate, some of his own associations—"childishness" with "freedom" and "parsimoniousness" with "social responsibility"—at their crudest (he is far too intelligent and subtle a man to make such

associations in any terms but those of metaphor, I should add). The story is in many ways a thematic rerun of the earlier "**The Crackpots**" (1956).

That he is capable of producing an SF story quite as ordinary and dull as the average SF story he demonstrated in 1974 with the publication of "**Sleeping Dogs**" which slipped naturally into the pages of *Analog*, a magazine which since 1940 or so seems to have devoted itself specifically to the curtailment and even destruction of the creative imagination. He seems to have gone into this enterprise with much the same spirit of a skilled high-wire monocyclist who for some reason wishes to show the world that he is as good at pushing an ordinary bike along an ordinary sidewalk as anyone else:

> A moment later, a new sun lit the sky as the dreadnought *Descartes* was strangled with its own weapon. It flared suddenly, blossomed . . . and was gone.

"**Bright Eyes**" (1965) was improvised around an existing illustration in response to a challenge by that remarkable editor Cele Lalli, whose editorship of *Amazing* and *Fantastic* in the 60s did so much to encourage the best writers of what came to be known as the US 'new wave'—Disch, Zelazny and so on. Here we see Ellison responding to a sympathetic audience (in the shape of Lalli) with a far better story that is still on a familiar theme (the central character is typically "alienated", another version of "the artist") and which I suspect presents us with more original images than appeared in the illustration. The image of the bleeding birds is particularly good. Again we find a fairly conventional "story" element, but all in all "Bright Eyes" is a successful performance if not a spectacularly ambitious one. "**The Discarded**" (also from *Fantastic*, but six years earlier) repeats the alienation theme and is about as unremarkable a story as "Sleeping Dogs." Ellison was here still translating his social rejects into people like the mutants in this story (and presenting arguments about the social usefulness of such rejects all but identical to his current arguments). Although he had written documentary fiction about actual social rejects (New York street gangs) he did not yet seem to have made the realisation that greater "immediacy", more effective imagery, could be gained by discarding conventional SF ideas and using his own experience. The familiar trappings of SF, the familiar

"optimism" of pulp stories, can be seen completely obscuring any individual idea or language in the second earliest story reprinted here, **"Wanted in Surgery"** (1957). Like me, Ellison is a pretty lousy science fiction writer.

Possibly because we are both lousy science fiction writers we independently picked on similar themes for our early work. Ellison wrote *"The Beast that Shouted Love at the Heart of the World"* (1968) at about the time I wrote a story called "The Lovebeast." He wrote **"Deeper than the Darkness"** (1957) at about the time I wrote a story called "Consuming Passion." All I can say about the latter is that they were both run-of-the-mill stories. I'm not sure, however, that I could call by own "pyro" story a "tone-poem". . . .

Like Ellison I was regarded for some years as a pretty ordinary kind of SF writer. We both of us became highly thought-of SF writers when we decided to stop doing SF. Then we began winning prizes for work which the average *Analog* reader would dismiss as mere "borderline" SF, or worse, "fantasy". Certainly, in **"I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream"** (1967) there are appropriate SF terms—computer is one of them—but essentially Ellison has learned to use the imagery and terminology of SF as metaphor—he has ceased to be dominated by the conventions of the genre and is making use of them. Compare that story to **"Big Sam Was My Friend"** (1958), a perfectly reasonable SF story which had appeared nearly ten years earlier. The storytelling method is much the same. The 1958 story is a well enough put together collection of fairly familiar SF images and ideas and the sentimental conventions of the ending are pretty mawkish. By 1967, however, Ellison had learned how to communicate his anger at the manifest ways in which the human spirit is debased, warped, robbed of its dignity by the stupidity and unimaginativeness of our social institutions. (He has always reflected his times but happily the 60s were more radical years and they made a far better mirror for his termperament.) He is still capable, occasionally, of sentimentality or (the opposite side of the same coin) obvious cynicism, but he has learned to check it not so much by standard literary "distancing" techniques or by the kind of irony found, say, in Ballard or Disch, as by an almost frenetic oral style which balances off one view against another. In a performer (a comedian of Bruce's stature for instance) it would emerge as "Oh, so ya don't like that

version, eh? How about this one, then . . . ?" Like all of us he is aiming to please his audience. Like some of us he is aiming to please it without flattering it, without appealing to universal middle-class assumptions about life, without distorting the fundamental subject, without wiping out the ambiguities and paradoxes which are the "truth" he is trying to make us see. Because he equates the cooler ironies of acceptable literary style with an unwillingness on the part of the author to "involve" himself in life (and often, naturally, he is right) he has sought and found his own peculiar, sometimes bizarre methods of storytelling. These can involve an attack on syntax and grammar which only a fool would find offensive, a wild mixing of metaphors and a rapid bringing together of associated images done not necessarily to achieve ironic effect, but done in an ironic "careless" spirit which again I tend to identify with the rapid, scatological delivery of a superb comedian (which Ellison, incidentally, is). My only regret is that Ellison doesn't, in fact, make the final transference from fantasy to comedy in his fiction (he has written far too little comic fiction)—for. as one of his heroes Gerald Kersh consistently proved, comedy can be an even better method of intensifying and "exaggerating" incident and imagery than fantasy.

"**Eyes of Dust**" (1959) is still too early a story to show anything more than the theme, yet again, of Individuality Destroyed. It lacks resonance. And "**World of the Myth**" (1964) seems to me to lack any saving irony to make it more than a conventional idea expressed in fairly conventional images, whereas "**Lonelyache**" (1964) is almost completely its opposite in intensity of imagination and feeling. And here in the introduction we receive another clue to Ellison's methods—performance as a kind of therapy in which the performer reaches for catharsis and in turn transmits it to the audience: a potentially self-destructive working method. It is the only way to play the blues, but it is a dangerous and sometimes unsuccessful game which can ruin a human personality when "vitality" is equated too much with "art" and reading a story like this makes me worry, as I sometimes worry when I watch David Bowie giving himself, like some latter-day Piaf, to his audience, if Ellison isn't exhausting himself too quickly. Such greedy drawing on the world of dreams requires enormous restitution unless we are to find ourselves living in a waking dream, a reality which lacks the texture of those deeper,

semiconscious worlds of sleep: for we are using the fundamental stuff of our inner selves, which needs particular forms of contemplative tranquility (too easily translated as "death") in order to replenish its reserves. In that sense, then, this particular story is the most frightening in the collection, for it describes a familiar (to me) suicide equation.

I read Ellison's introduction to "**Delusion for a Dragon Slayer**" (1966) after I conceived my "performance" theory. The style itself is scarcely "experimental", but the form is much more free than most of those he had used up to that time and, in my view, much more satisfying as a result. The interesting thing is that he says of it that he wanted "a density of images, a veritable darkness of language, comparable in narrative to what saxophonist John Coltrane blows in his 'sheets of sound' style." In this story he is able to display most of his virtues and few of his vices and it is a story which carries for me almost the emotional intensity of my favorite Ellison imaginative story, "Croatoan" (1975).

And in the introduction to "**Pretty Maggie Moneyeyes**" (1967) we find a further confirmation of Ellison's frustration with the written word, with his looking to the techniques of the film (and possibly the record) for his models. "I scream," he says, "helplessly at the inadequacies of the lineal medium. There is a section herein in which I try to convey a sense of impression of the moment of death. In films I could use effects. In type-on-paper it comes down to the enormously ineffectual italics, type tricks, staccato sentences and spacings of a man groping to expand his medium. Bear with me. It is experimentation, and unless typesetters and editors somehow develop the miracle talent of letting writers tear the form apart and reassemble it in their individual ways, the best I'll be able to do in terms of freedom of impact is what I got away with here . . ."

Impact could be the key word in that statement. A good many writers—particularly those who accept and enjoy the world about them—are conscious of their rivals in films and tv and even newspapers where virtually nothing is demanded of the audience but that they sit and be "entertained". Like me, like Ballard, like Disch and like, I suspect, most of us, Ellison watched a lot of television (witness *The Glass Teat*) and from time to time he probably lost the will, habit or impulse to read a book thoroughly. He knows that his

impatience with the printed word is reflected in the majority of his potential audience. In seeking ways of challenging the rivalry of screens and stereos he is taking part in a movement which began almost with the century and which I now suspect is pointless in terms of its conscious goals but worthwhile in that it assimilates and develops subject matter, images and dramatic techniques which go periodically to revive, expand and enrich that most flexible medium of all—the medium of printed fiction.

Ironically, of course, it is in this medium that Ellison—who has tried his hand at most other forms—excels, and stimulates many other writers, particularly the young. He has done a lot more for American imaginative fiction than many of those who currently receive the praise of a cautious literary establishment. For one thing, his performances are considerably tighter than those who appear to have set out to produce the fictional equivalent of, say, "Tubular Bells," (1973) in which one four-bar phrase is repeated over and over again on a variety of instruments, and in which every musical vice is combined (tautology as an art form?). It would probably be enough if Ellison simply rocked on. But, happily, he does rather more than that, whilst retaining the virtues of a "vulgarity" which in history is always looked back on as legitimate and enviable expression of the romantic spirit.

He is, as I have said elsewhere, a brave little beast, this dwarfish Jew, this Midwestern Byron, this persuasive spieler who has been able to make me produce the first critical introduction to a book by an individual I have written in 12 years. Like all the finest performers, he uses his charm almost unconsciously. And because he is such a good and generous performer, it is extremely hard not to forgive him virtually anything.

Which, of course, must be another reason why he writes so many introductions and at such length.

Michael Moorcock
London

Introduction

Linch Pins and Turning Points

WHAT I CLEARLY PERCEIVE NOW, I was too young and hungry to have understood then. I sold the collection of stories gathered under the title *Paingod and Other Delusions* in 1965 for $1750; and I was damned glad to get it. I was destitute. By 1967, when I managed to con the paperback house that had lost money on *Paingod* to try again with Ellison, I'd won a few awards; real hot stuff; budding superstar. I was three notches up from destitute. I wasn't missing any meals; but I was postponing a lot of them.

By April of 1967, when *I Have No Mouth & I Must Scream* was published, I was in the Big Time, and so I naturally received a superstar's advance for the collection. $1750.

Even as recently as 11 years ago, writers who were relegated to the category of "science fiction" were subsisting on coolie wages. A penny or two cents a word for short stories was still the prevailing rate in most of the available markets. If you hit the top slicks they'd lay five hundred bucks on you. But the top slicks clearly separated "science fiction writers" from "serious writers." Philip Roth was serious; John Updike was serious; Herbert Gold was serious. Theodore Sturgeon and Philip K. Dick and Thomas Disch were pishers. They wrote SF. And they had names. My name was ten letters longer than mud.

Not to mention, I wasn't even writing science fiction. I was writing fantasy. Or something. There wasn't a name for it, and there wasn't even a category for it. So they lumped it in with the SF books and I could protest all I wanted; it didn't make any difference. Bug-eyed monsters went on the covers of my books. Honest to God, literally not

figuratively. If you ever lay your hands on the first four of five editions of Paingod, you'll see a genuine bug-eyed monster.

But even though I was being packaged and sold the same way the SF writers were being marketed, I was being rejected by magazine editors left and right because the stories I was submitting "aren't science fiction; they're fantasy; and I *do not* buy fantasy." You don't have to take my word for it, I have the rejection slips in my file in a folder labeled "Bounce Notes." Some of the most prestigious editors in the field rejected stories like "Pretty Maggie Moneyeyes" and " 'Repent, Harlequin!' Said the Ticktockman" and "Lonelyache." Also the editors of *Esquire*, *The Atlantic*, *Playboy*, *New American Review* and *Paris Review*. Oh, I was in a wonderful place. Between a pudding and a mushy place. Neither fish nor fowl, I was writing too weirdly for the straight journals, and not technologically extrapolative enough for the genre magazines.

Now it's 1978, and quite another song is being sung.

I could probably sell my grocery list for three grand to some halfwit publication or other, if I added a little action and dropped in a dollop of social significance.

But I won't. Screw them.

Nor will I allow myself to be called a science fiction writer. There are people writing who *are* SF writers, and what they do they do very well. But what I do ain't what they do. So I reject the facile labels that permit ease of categorization for newsdealers. I'm a fantasist, if you *must* have your little labels; but even that doesn't fit too well.

And what I was too young and hungry to understand when *Paingod* and *I Have No Mouth & I Must Scream* were published, is that the stories in those books—the stories that make up *this* book—were the single most important clutch of work I've ever done. These are the pivotal stories. The linch pins and the turning points. I've written better stories since then, deeper stories sometimes and shallower stories sometimes, even more widely read and acclaimed stories. But none more significant, because these were the stories that first contained the voice all my later work has echoed. If I have achieved any degree of originality, any share of fame, any claim to the permanence of my work . . . it stems directly from this body of stories. They are the demonstrable proof of a young, commercially-oriented writer putting aside the toys of childhood and attempting to

come to grips with the terrors and honors and joys of maturity. They are the rock on which I have tried to build the fantasy towers of my dreams. That the towers do not tumble or shatter when I screw up, that they do not tremble and vibrate when the reviews are bad, is verification of the solidness of the rock.

Even if I live to an unbecoming old age, and am honored for the hundreds of stories still in me, there will never again be an unbroken stretch of work that will surpass in importance what I set down here, at a time when the doors were just opening, and the sun was only beginning to rise.

How could I have suspected, when I began writing, "Limp, the body of Gorrister hung from the pink palette . . ." in a hotel room in Cleveland in 1966, with no bloody idea at all of how the story would develop or end, that I was beginning my personal equivalent of Asimov's "Nightfall"—the story that people would tell me, years later, was "the best thing I ever wrote." (And my reaction is the same as Isaac's when he gets hit with that line. Kee-*rist!* He wrote "Nightfall" in 1941. Can you imagine what effect such a thoughtless remark makes on a man who has produced a body of such exemplary work over a period of close to four decades? What those well-intentioned—but graceless—enthusiasts are saying is, "You were at your peak, three years into your career, Dr. Asimov, and you've been on the downhill side ever since.") I doubt that "Nightfall" is the best thing Isaac has ever written, and I am *damned* certain "I Have No Mouth" is light-years away from the best I've ever written.

Nonetheless, it was the story that made the greatest impact on the readership, even though I'd written " 'Repent, Harlequin!' Said the Ticktockman" the year before, and had won both the Hugo and Nebula with it. They were my first awards, and they were quite clearly pivotal in winning for me some serious recognition among science fiction enthusiasts. And pursuant to that thought, let me digress for a moment.

From 1955, when I began writing professionally, till 1966, my position in the pantheon of esteemed SF writers was roughly akin to that of *Mad*'s Alfred E. Neuman in the pantheon of esteemed Great Philosophers. For those who discovered imaginative fiction in the last decade during which I've been high-profile (many would say offensively omnipresent), collecting all sorts of keen trophies for my

stories, appearing in college level text-anthologies, being analyzed in academic treatises, appearing on TV talk shows, running the lecture circuit, winding up as Guest of Honor at the World SF Convention in Phoenix this year . . . that may seem a revelation. We tend to forget history. But that was the case. I was largely ignored during the first ten years of my career, and when attention *was* paid, by such observers as Frank M. Robinson, Robert Heinlein, Steve Allen, Charles Beaumont, Leigh Brackett and Edmond Hamilton, Robert Bloch or Theodore Sturgeon, the praise was largely overlooked by the old-line readers who continued to worship at the altars of the established writers from the '40s and '50s. Old legends die hard.

I cannot harbor too serious a grudge on that count, however. I was learning my craft, and what I was writing—while filled with verve and flash and intensity—was considerably less than noteworthy. As Mike Moorcock aptly points out in his introduction to this omnibus volume, quite a lot of what I'd done prior to 1965 was simply space-filler.

But with " 'Repent, Harlequin!' " and "I Have No Mouth" all that changed. It was overnight stardom. After a mere ten years of working for penurious wages, writing novelettes overnight to go with pulp magazine covers featuring giant ants, having my experimental stories rejected consistently because they "didn't have a beginning, middle and end" in that order. Don't forget: this was two years before the publication of *Dangerous Visions*, and many younger readers will not understand that it was a very different world of science fiction. And for those of us railing at the restrictions, it was a chilly world indeed. Disch and Ballard and Spinrad and Moorcock and Wilhelm and Dick and Le Guin and M. John Harrison were writing, getting published, but they suffered the same muzzling as I did. We had precious few beacons to follow—Phil Farmer, Sturgeon, Matheson, Blish, and (in a peculiar way) Robert Sheckley, one of the most underrated seminal influences of the '50s. And Bester, of course.

But until that *real* "Golden Age" of the mid-60s, SF for anyone who chose to kick out the jambs was a more-than-faintly disapproving arena. And not merely in terms of lack of approbation: financially, it was monstrous. As I noted, in 1967, my advance payment for *I Have No Mouth & I Must Scream* was only $1750.

Then the question asks itself, what changed the world?

How did the stories in these books, and the explosively experimental writings of all those other writers, come to be? Explanations in detail await the trained eyes of better critics than I, but if I were to venture a guess, it would be this:

The writers who came into the field in the latter half of the '50s and the beginning of the '60s were from a more literary tradition than the "science hobbyists" who had dominated the genre from the '20s on. For many of us, the writings of Mark Twain, Doris Lessing, Franz Kafka, Robert Coover and Jorge Luis Borges were far more meaningful in terms of what we wanted to say, and the ways in which we desired to say it, than the heretofore totemized classics of Asimov, Heinlein, van Vogt, Clarke or Campbell. While *Analog* continued to publish the sophomoric literary simplicities of engineers and technicians playing dilettante at the art of storytelling (and there were, of course, exceptions . . . all the more startling for their infrequency of appearance), a mass exodus began among those of us who perceived ourselves to be *writers*, not "science fiction writers" or, as the world at large has been gulled into naming us, "sci-fi guys." The flight took us to the men's magazines, to the little literary journals, to the semipro magazines published by fans, straight into hardcover or paperback original, and to the even-less-financially-rewarding secondary SF magazines. (If historians wish to verify this mildly sacrilegious assertion, I commend them to a perusal of the table of contents of the four or five SF magazines being published from 1965 through 1975. Consider how many of today's "big names" made their mark in publications other than *Analog*. Further, deponent saith not.)

And this literary tradition, as opposed to the "problem-solving Technocratic" tradition, provided us with the background to be less slavishly optimistic about the wonders of Wings Over The World (as Wells referred to his savior warrior-scientists).

We could see that unbridled technological advance without an accompanying uplifting of the human spirit, without an accompanying development of ethical standards, without an accompanying intensification of humane behavior . . . could well lead to destruction of the human race. And we began writing stories that said so.

(No, of course, we weren't the first to do it or say it. The dystopian tradition was a firmly entrenched one. But from internal evidence it is

clear to see that almost as one a wide range of writers, male and female, young and old, left- and right-wing, began to loudly question the accepted tenets of the fiction that had been appearing for nearly 50 years.)

It netted us terrible backlash, censure, ridicule, animosity. And that imbecilic phrase "New Wave."

But the talent was there, and now, ten years later, what we did has been absorbed into the mainstream of SF even as SF is being absorbed into the mainstream of American fiction *in toto*.

There was that, as explanation for the emergence of stories such as the ones in this volume, and one other major factor that I think contributed greatly to freeing our hands. It was a time of reevaluation and revolution in this country. One could not exist in the late '60s and early '70s and be unaware of the powerful social forces at work. Civil rights, the antiwar movement, student unrest, Watergate, Nixonian repression, assassination conspiracies, the encroaching horror of television, the spread of mass-market paperbacks. All this combined to provide those of us with restless spirits a much larger canvas on which to work.

And from these conflicting, inexorable forces we drew energy, and the resolution to buck the system that prevailed in editorial offices, unspoken, barely perceived, but prevalent nonetheless.

From that time, from those inputs, came *Stand On Zanzibar* and *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *This Immortal* and *The Einstein Intersection* and the emergence in full flower of Joanna Russ, James Tiptree, Jr. (in all her persona), Gene Wolfe, Barry Malzberg, a reborn Robert Silverberg. And the stories in these two slim volumes.

Now I sit here in 1978, looking back at the stories that made my reputation—such as it is—a letter in a recent issue of *Future* magazine opines that "Ellison has already given SF writers a bad name" and equates that name with "troublemaker"—and I try to read what I wrote then, with an eye to cleaning up the awkwardisms and syntactical gaffes both Sturgeon and Moorcock relentlessly use to thumbscrew me. And I am, of course, mildly mortified at the purple prose, the simplistic reasoning, the cliches held over from my early days when I didn't understand that I wasn't a "sci-fi guy."

Yet, on sum, I cannot but love these little fables. They were turning points for me. They were the ones that led to this moment

and this combined volume. Had it not been for the Harlequin and Maggie and AM and all the Discarded on that ship of doom, I would not now be writing an introduction for a book intended for serious students of imaginative literature.

I will not apologize for the less-than-graceful prose, nor for the less than-successful plots, nor for the grammatical errors. I've tried to flense as many of them from the text as I could reasonably manage in something under a lifetime, but only to provide a variorum text for those who care. Beyond that, I stand behind what that younger Ellison wrote. The kid was gauche and fumble-fingered much of the time, but he sure had fire in him.

And since I've learned the difference and proper use of *lie* and *lay*, I don't think either Sturgeon or Moorcock can fault me too much. God knows I'm trying.

In as many senses of that word as you can imagine.

Harlan Ellison
Los Angeles
21 September 78

Paingod and Other Delusions

The first edition of this book was dedicated to a friend of fourteen years' brotherhood. He is now a friend of twenty-seven years' shared joys and agonies. If anything, this rededication is even more appropriate, tagged as it is for

ROBERT SILVERBERG

New Introduction

Your Basic Crown of Thorns

ONE NIGHT, SOME YEARS AGO, maybe five or six, I woke up in the darkness and saw words burning bright-red on the ceiling of my bedroom.

ARE YOU AWARE OF HOW MUCH
PAIN THERE IS IN THE WORLD?

I crawled out of the rack and felt my way through the house to my office, sat down at the typewriter, put on the light and—still asleep—typed the words on paper. I went back to bed and forgot all about it. That night I had programmed my dreams for a Sergio Leone spaghetti western with score by Morricone. No cartoon, no short subjects.

The next morning, coffee cup in hand, I went to my typewriter and found the question waiting for me, all alone on a sheet of yellow foolscap. Rhetorical. Of *course* I knew how much pain there was in the world . . . *is* in the world.

But I couldn't quite bring myself to ripping the sheet off the roller and getting on with what I should have been working at. I sat and stared at it for the longest time.

Understand something: I am not a humanitarian. I distrust selfless philanthropists and doers of good deeds. When you discover that the black natives of Lamborene hated Schweitzer, you begin to suspect noble individuals have some secret need in them to be loved, to look good in others' eyes, to succor themselves or dissipate their guilts with benevolent gestures. Rather than the sanctimonious bullshit of politicians about "the good people of this fair state" I would joyously vote for any candidate who had the courage to stand up and say,

"Look, I'm going to steal from you. I'm going to line my pockets and those of my friends, but I'm not going to steal *too* much. But in the deal I'll give you better roads, safer schools, better education and a happier condition of life. I'm not going to do it out of compassion or dedication to the good people of this fair state; I'm going to do it because if I *do* these things, you'll elect me again and I can steal a little bit more." That joker has my vote, no arguments.

(Rule of thumb: whenever you hear a politician call it "the United States of America" instead of simply "the U.S."—you know he's bullshitting you. It's like the convoluted syntax of college textbooks. When they start writing in a prolix manner that makes you read a paragraph seven times to get the message *See Dick and Jane run, oh oh oh!* you know someone is trying to flummox you. Same for politicians; if they start running a fast ramadoolah past you, instead of speaking simply and directly, they're trying to weasel. This lesson in good government comes to you through the courtesy of a man who was snookered by Eugene McCarthy *and* George McGovern.)

So what I'm trying to tell you is that I'm last in the line of noble, unselfish, golden humanitarians. What I do for the commonweal I do for *myself.* I am a selfish sonofabitch who contributes to "good causes" because I feel shitty if I don't. But if the truth be told, I'm the same as you: the deaths of a hundred thousand flood victims in some banana republic doesn't touch me one one-millionth as much as the death of my dog did. If you get wiped out on a freeway somewhere and I don't know you personally, I may go tsk-tsk, but the fact that I haven't had a good bowel movement in two days is more painful to me.

So those words burning on my ceiling really threw me.

They really got to me.

I had them printed on big yellow cards so they'd pop, and I started giving them to friends. I had one framed for my office. It's up on the wall to the right of my typewriter as I sit here telling you about it.

But if I'm not this terrific *concerned* human being, what's it all in aid of? Well, it's in aid of my coming to terms with my own mortality, something that'll happen to all of you if it hasn't already. And it speaks to what this collection of stories is all about, in a way. So we'll talk about pain.

Here are a few different kinds of pain I think are worthy of our attention.

The other night I had dinner with a good friend, a woman writer whom I've known for about ten years. Though we've never had a romantic relationship, I love her dearly and care about her: she's a *good* person, and a talented writer, and those two qualities put her everlastingly on my list of When You Need Help, Even In The Dead Of Night, I'm On Call. Over dinner, we talked about an anguish she has been experiencing for a number of years. She's afraid of dying alone and unloved.

Some of you are nodding in understanding. A few of you are smiling. The former understand pain, the latter are assholes. Or very lucky. We've *all* dreaded that moment when we pack it in, get a fast rollback of days and nights, and realize we're about to go down the hole never having belonged to anyone. If you've never felt it, you're either an alien from far Arcturus or so insensitive your demise won't matter. Or very lucky.

Her problem is best summed up by something Theodore Sturgeon once said: "There's no absence of love in the world, only worthy places to put it." My friend gets involved with guys who do her in. Not all her fault. Some of it is—we're never wholly victims, we help construct the tiger traps filled with spikes—but not all of it. She's vulnerable. While not naïve, she *is* innocent. And that's a dangerous, but laudable capacity: to wander through a world that can be very uncaring and amorally cruel, and still be astonished at the way the sunlight catches the edge of a coleus leaf. Anybody puts her down for that has to go through me first.

So she keeps trying, and the ones with long teeth sense her vulnerability and they move in for the slow kill. (That's evil: only the human predator destroys slowly, any decent hunting animal rips out the throat and feeds, and that's that. The more I see of people, the better I like animals.)

She is a woman who needs a man. There are men who need a good woman. There's nothing sexist in saying that, it's a condition of the animal. (And just so I don't get picketed by Gay Lib, there are men who need a good man and women who need a good woman. There are also men who need a good chicken and women who need a big dog, and that's nobody's business but their own, you get my meaning, so let's cut the crap and move on.) Everybody needs to belong to somebody. Sometime. For an hour, a day, a year, forever . . . it's all

the same. And when you've paid dues on a bunch of decades without having made the proper linkup, you come to live with a pain that is a dull ache, unlocalized, suffusing every inch of your skin and throbbing like a bruise down on the bone.

What to tell her, what to say? There's nothing. I'll try to find her someone who cares, but it's a pain she'll have to either overcome by guerrilla attacks on the singles bars and young-marrieds' parties, or learn to love herself sufficiently well that she becomes more accessible to the men she's turning off by unspoken words and invisible vibes. People sense the pain, and they shy away from it, because they've felt it themselves, and they don't want to get contaminated. When you need a job and hunger for one openly, you never get hired because they smell desperation on you like panther sweat.

But it's a pain you can't ignore. I can't ignore.

Here's another one.

What follows is one of hundreds of letters I get from readers. I hate getting mail, because I don't have the time to answer it, and I get a lot of it—probably due to writing introductions like this where I expose my viscera—but more of that and what Avram Davidson says about it later on—and most of the time I send out a form letter, otherwise I wouldn't have time to write stories. But occasionally I get a letter that simply cannot be ignored. This is one of them.

I won't use the young woman's name for reasons of libel that will become clear as you read the letter. The story to which she makes reference is titled "Lonelyache" and it appears in my collection I HAVE NO MOUTH AND I MUST SCREAM [Pyramid Books, 1974]. It is about a man who comes to unhappy terms with his own overpowering guilt about being a loveless individual. The "Discon" reference is to the World SF Convention held on Labor Day 1974 in Washington D.C.

Dear Harlan:

We spoke briefly at Discon concerning reading sf to the mentally ill—your sf among others'. Something happened the other day that I thought might interest you.

I am presently working in the one medical-surgical building that —— —— has. Since most of my patients are in here for only very short stays, there has not been much opportunity for me to continue

the reading/therapy that I had been doing in another, quieter building. (Also, having IV bottles and bouncing EKG's to baby-sit leaves little time for other pastimes, however therapeutic). (And furthermore, I'm working midnight shift now—which cuts down somewhat on people interested in being read to).

Anyway. In this madhouse of a building we have, among wards intended to hold up to twenty-five, one which cannot house more than seven: Ward 6A; otherwise known as Wounded Knee (from a time when we had five fractured patellas up here at once). A fracture ward, as it were, which also houses diabetics being newly-regulated, and staph infections, and new heart attacks who're healing. Rather a quiet place as contrasted to most of this madhouse (pardon unintentional pun), and since I came back from Discon, my very own ward (on nights).

We have up here at present a patient who has put more employees of various sorts out on compensation for various injuries of various sorts than any other patient in the hospital.

The reason for this is hardly any fault of hers: the fault lies with the aforementioned employees, who worked constantly (maybe unwittingly, but that doesn't excuse them) to drive her a good deal more insane than she ever was to begin with. The syndrome is easily described: A) Some facet of our enlightened state hospital system (the Earth should only swallow it) enrages/tortures an already hurting mind to the point where it can no longer control itself and the person attacks the first thing that comes to hand. Eventually, an employee steps in to halt the mayhem, and gets mayhemmed himself. B) The word goes around from staff to staff, from staff to patients, eventually is voiced right in front of the sick person involved: "That one is nuts, *will* kill *you if you turn your back, goes bananas at the drop of a hat, etc. ad nauseam . . ." C) The person thinks, "I haven't been too well lately, these are attendants and nurses and such, they* say *I'm crazy; who am I to prove them wrong? So I'll be crazy, I'll attack everything in sight . . ." and so it goes, and the ugly circle turns on itself. Follows thereupon much Thorazine, many camisoles, long hours in seclusion which do no one any good. Things get worse.*

As it was on the night of this past July 4th. The lady who is now one of "MY PEOPLE" was in seclusion—as usual—on a third-floor ward. It was hot. No one would bring her a drink of water. Also, her room

stank—as might have been expected: no one would take her out to the john, she had long since stopped asking, and had used the floor. The stench, and the heat, and her thirst all combined, and she rose up and determined to go OUT. *Naturally, as she later explained it to me, they would not* let *her out. So she reached out, heaved at the screening that she had been yanking on for the past five years, managed to detach it, and* went *OUT. Three floors down.*

Naturally, she had fractures. The right humerus, the right tibia and fibula, a re-fracture of the left tibia and a new one of the left ankle. (Amazingly, that was all*—no pelvic or spinal involvement.) She was sent up to my ward. It was very interesting up here for a while: she insisted that she was fine, that her legs hurt a little but she wanted to take a walk, that was what she had come out for, anyway. . . . What do you say to something like that? I cried a lot, and held her down. The next day I was transferred to another building, where they needed a nurse, so they said.*

After much screaming and yelling at the chief of Nursing Services, I managed to get out of the nothing building where they sent me—a building in no need whatsoever of another nurse, where the only really worthwhile thing to do was to read to the patients—and came back to the Med-Surg building. It took me a month.

When I got back, I found matters somewhat improved. The day nurse on this ward is a good friend of mine, a very highly skilled lady who got something like a 99 in her psychiatric nursing course, and deserved more. She was not afraid of this patient, and had been doing constant therapy on her. It was working. The patient was calmer than she had been, was being weaned off the 4000 mg/day of Thorazine that her building had her on (500 mg/day is enough to quiet just about anyone, but a tolerance had built up), she was beginning to look around and see things, to form relationships, with people (she was schizophrenic, and was actually reaching out . . . *incredible). She still had relapses, incidents of going for people, of throwing things, but they were abortive. She was getting better.*

Some time passed . . . she continued to improve. I got taken off my job for awhile to go through the hospital's orientation program, came back again for a little while, found her doing well, took a few days' leave for Discon, came back, found her still getting better—and then everything fell in on me—on her*—rather suddenly.*

This requires a small digression. We have on this ward, on the evening shift, an idiot. It has the letters RN after its name, but don't let it fool you: a nurse it ain't. This person delights in tormenting the patients verbally, and not getting caught at it. God knows I've tried, but I must walk too heavy or something. On this particular night she told the patient that the day nurse (whom the patient loved dearly, and who was having her turn in orientation) was never, never *coming back again. Are there words foul enough for such a person? Well . . .*

I came on at 12, checked my ward, found things quiet: the patient in question resting in bed, awake. I went to her, checked her casts (arm and both legs), spoke to her: she didn't answer. This was par for the course, so I wished her good night and went away.

About 1:30 I heard something go crack! *and then heard glass shatter on the floor. By the time I was standing up, something went* thud! *and by the time I reached the door of the office, so had my patient. She was out of her bed, teetering on her casts, with a big sharp piece of glass in her uncasted left hand. The hand was bleeding a little, but that was not what concerned me. This lady was no amateur, no wristslasher; she would bend her head back to cut her throat. She was faster than I was: also somewhat larger. (Picture it if you will, Harlan: 160 lbs. of her, about six feet tall: 104 lbs. of me, 5'6":* and *she has the glass. Who wins the wrestling match? You can't use aikido holds on someone with three casted extremities. I can't anyway.) (Not when the fourth is flailing glass—and it's my patient.)*

So we stood there, and I looked up (a mile or so, it seemed) and said, "What's the matter?" and she said, "Pat's not coming back, (the RN) said so, and I don't want to believe her: but if it's true, then I want to be dead. And if it's not true, look at me, look how easily someone made me go crazy! I ought *to be dead."*

Everything useful or therapeutic I had ever learned, heard or read went shoosh! out of my head, leaving me tabula rosa, *as the saying goes, and feeling hopeless. And I opened my mouth, knowing full well that nothing worthwhile would come out, and the tail of my eye caught sight of an idea, sitting on top of a pile of books on calligraphy that I had brought with me: a copy of I HAVE NO MOUTH AND I MUST SCREAM. I said, "Come on in, sit down, let's talk about it. I have something here that may interest you." And we sat down, and I took my life in my hands and read her "Lonelyache."*

You proclaimed the story to be therapy in the introduction, of course. I have often wondered after reading it just how far your own experience paralleled it. Merely clinical interest—all the wondering went out of me that night. I was watching my lady.

About halfway through she put the glass aside and shut her eyes and listened. *I shook and kept reading.*

When it was nearly finished, I panicked: the ending was too downkey: the protagonist commits suicide! I didn't know if I could turn her mood upward again.

I finished it, and she looked at me hard for a few seconds, and I said, "Well, what does it do for you?" She was quiet a moment, and then said, "He wanted to be brave on the way out, didn't he?"

"I think so," I said.

She thought some more. "But he did *go out."*

I nodded. It was all that was left in me: I was getting the beginnings of Oh-God-I-Did-The-Wrong-Thing! *and I was holding hard to keep it from showing.*

"Is that the only way to go, then?" she asked, and oh! the despair. I wanted to cry and couldn't. I said, "But consider first: why *did he go?"*

"Because he was all alone." And she looked at me, and fed me the straight line I had been praying for: "I'm all alone too, though—aren't I?"

"Do you *think you're all alone?"*

She looked at me, and at the glass, and at me again, and stood up rocking on her casts again. She tossed the answer off so casually: "No, I guess not." She clumped back to her room, got back in bed, and rolled herself up in the covers and went to sleep. So casually.

So even if you weren't here in the body, Harlan, you helped. No telling whether this will happen again, or how many times, or what might trigger it, but this *time you helped. I thank you for having the guts to put your own fear and loneliness down on paper and then allowing it to be published: it takes courage. And has done someone some good.*

Thought you might like to know.

That's another kind of pain, and it's real, and if that letter didn't hurt you where you hurt best, then *nothing* in this book will touch

you, and maybe you ought to be volunteering for something like the Genocide Corps in Brazil.

Here's another pain that crushes.

I went to Driver Survival School last Saturday. I'd gotten a ticket I didn't deserve (are there any other kinds?) and the judge at my trial suggested if I wanted to take a day's worth of traffic school the ticket would be dismissed. So I did the deed.

Traffic Survival School, what a ripoff, I thought. Cynical and smartass like the other fifty people booked for that day. Seven and a half hours of bullshit from some redneck cop.

Sure.

But something happened. Something that turned me around. You've got to know, I don't like cops. It's a gut reaction I've had since I was a tiny tot. My first encounter with the Man is recorded in a story called "Free With This Box" and you'll be able to read it in a few months when Pyramid reissues GENTLEMAN JUNKIE. The story was written a long time ago, and the event happened even longer ago, but the reaction is as fresh in me as if it had happened yesterday. So I went with a snarl on my lips and a loathing for the Laws that Bonnie and Clyde would have envied.

But the two California Highway Patrol officers who lectured the class were sharp and open and knew they had a captive audience, and course-corrected for it. But still everyone in the room was cynical, taking it all as a lark, dragged by the waste of having to spend a dynamite Saturday in a small room in the Sportsmen's Lodge, sitting on a hard chair and learning the whys&wherefores of the new California U-turn law.

Until they showed the obligatory highway safety horror film.

I've seen them before, so have you. Endless scenes of maimed and crushed men and women being crowbarred out of burning wrecks; women with their heads split open like pomegranates, their brains on the tarmac; guys who'd been hit by trains at crossings, legs over here, arms over there; shots of cars that demonstrate the simple truth that the human body is only a Baggie filled with fluid—the tuck&roll interiors evenly coated with blood and meat. And it sickens you, and you turn your head away, and sensitive stomachs heave, and no one makes clever remarks, and you want to puke. But it somehow has no

more effect in totality than the 7:00 News with film of burned Vietnamese babies. You never think it'll happen to you.

Until they came to the final scene of the film, and it was so hairy even the Cal Highway officers grew weak: a six-year-old black kid had been hit by a car. Black ghetto neighborhood. Hundreds of people lining the street rubbernecking. Small shape covered by a blanket in the middle of the street. Cops all over the place. According to the film it wasn't the driver's fault, kid had run out from between parked cars, driver hadn't had time to stop, centerpunched the kid doing 35.

Shot of the car. A tiny dent. Not enough to even Earl Scheib it. Small shape under a blanket.

Then they brought the mother out to identify the kid. Two men supporting her between them. They staggered forward with her and a cop lifted the edge of the blanket.

They must have had someone there with a directional mike. I got every breath, every moan, every whisper of air. Oh my God. The sound of that woman's scream. The pain. From out of the center of the earth. No human throat was ever meant to produce such a terrible sound. She collapsed, just sank away like limp meat between the supporting men. And the film ended. And I still heard that scream.

It's five days later as I write this. I cannot block that scream from my mind. I never will. I now drive more slowly, I now fasten my safety belt, I now take no chances. I have always been a fast driver, some say a crazy driver; though I've never had an accident and used to race sports cars, I always thought I was a fucking Barney Oldfield. No more. Chuckle if you will, friends, but I'm on the wagon. And that wagon gonna move *very* carefully. I don't *ever* want to hear that scream outside my head.

Are you aware of how much pain there is in the world?

Yeah, I'm aware. Now. Because I've been writing for eighteen years and I keep getting these letters, and I keep listening to people, and at times it's too much to handle. If you don't know what I'm talking about, go read Nathanael West's MISS LONELYHEARTS.

And so I write these introductions, what my friend and the brilliant writer Avram Davidson calls "going naked in the world." Avram wrote me recently and, in the course of taking me to task for something he believed I had done wrong, he more-than-mildly castigated me for dumping it all on paper. Well, he's not the first, and

from time to time I've considered never writing another of these self-examinations. But Irwin Shaw said, "A man does not write one novel at a time or one play at a time or even one quatrain at a time. He is engaged in the long process of putting his whole life on paper. He is on a journey and he is reporting in: 'This is where I think I am and this is what this place looks like today.' "

This report, then, is about pain. The subject is very much with me. My mother had another heart attack, and the general topic of mortality obsesses me these days. We will all die, no reprieve. A beautiful young lady of my acquaintance, who happens to be an accomplished astrologer, told me (though she knows I don't believe in astrology) that my chart says I'm going to die by being beheaded. Terriffic remark. She told it to me one night when we were out on a date, and she was surprised that I turned out to be no goddam good in bed that night.

Well, she needn't have been so surprised; *I* know I'm going to buy the farm one day, sooner or later depending on how much I run my mouth in dangerous situations. But it isn't death that bothers me, it's dying alone.

So I think about pain, and I present you with this group of stories that say a little something about what I've learned on the subject. They may not be terribly deep or illuminating, just some random thoughts I've had through the years. A few of them seem funny, and they were intended so because I think the only things that get us through the pain are laughter and the promise of love to come. At least the possibility of it. But each one of them has some special pain in it, and I urge you to seek it out, through the chuckles and the bug-eyed aliens and the what-if furniture that makes these stories and not sermons.

Because there's only one thing that links us as human beings: the universality of our pain and the commonality of our need to go out bravely.

Harlan Ellison
9 November 74

Introduction to First Edition

SPERO MELIORA: From the Vicinity of Alienation

THIS IS MY ELEVENTH BOOK. (It should have been thirteen, counting the one I did under a pseudonym for a *schlock* publisher because I needed the money some years ago, but number twelve was a false start Avram Davidson and myself wish had never happened and fortunately never got into print, and thirteen is a book of short stories no one seems constitutionally capable of publishing, and which seems well on its way to becoming an "underground classic" for those who have read it in manuscript form.) That doesn't seem too bad, for thirty years; twenty of which were spent in learning on which end of this particular body the head was attached.

Very nearly all of the past ten books have had some sort of introduction or prologue by myself. I have the feeling it is necessary to know what a writer stands for, in what he believes, what it takes to make him bleed, before a reader should be asked to care about what the writer has written. This is patently foolish. B. Traven writes eloquently, feelingly, brilliantly, yet he is an unknown quantity. Wilde's life contradicts most of what he wrote. Shaw and Dickens and Stendahl were virtually anonymous in their seminal, important years, yet what they wrote remains keen and true and valid. Granted, the philosophy of "love me, love my writing" is *my* problem. Still, it is the one to which I pander, and so each of my books has had some viscera-revealing treatise at the opening, from which the usual reader reaction has been total revulsion and a mind-boggling reeling-back in disbelief. I have the unseemly habit of going naked into the world. It

comes from a seamy desire on my part not only to be a Great Writer, but to Be Adored as well.

There is no introduction this time.

I'm tired.

This is my first book in over two years. (In early 1962 I came out to Hollywood, as part of a package deal that involved dismembering a marriage and fracturing a small but intense group of lives. I've been here over three years, as this is written, and I've been busy making a decent living in television and feature films to do much book work. And I cry a lot.)

I hit thirty-one last May; I turned around, and I'd grown up. I knew Santa Claus was a winehead who spent the other eleven months sopping up watery chicken soup with brown bread in a Salvation Army kitchen; the Easter Bunny was only Welsh Rarebit mispronounced; "good women" exist in their idyllic state mostly in weak novels by Irving Wallace, John O'Hara, Fannie Hurst and Leon Urine (my misspell, not the typesetter's); Marilyn Monroe, Camus and JFK got cut off in their prime, and the eggsucking monsters who buried those three Civil Rights workers twenty-one feet down are running loose; and the sense of wonder has been relegated to buying old comic books and catching The Shadow on Sunday radio, trying to find out where that innocence of childhood or nature went.

So there is no introduction. It has made this book incredibly belated in appearing already. Seven times I tried to start an introduction to it, while Don Bensen (an incredibly patient, long-suffering, extremely fine editor) was stunned by the hammers of deadlines, publishers, schedules and irresponsible authors. And seven times I came to ass-grinding halts.

The first few times it was a compendium of bitter, cynical comment on writing for the science fiction field. Then there was a lighthearted rollicking essay on Life In Our Times, but by the time I had hit the thirty-six ball-less wonders who watched Catherine Genovese get knifed to death in New York, my rollick was a bit strained. So I attempted a more serious assaying of the contemporary scene. It touched on such matters as the afternoon I was called a Communist by the bag-boy in the Thriftimart because I objected to the Goldwater pamphlets at point-of-sale; the impertinence and nosiness of credit checks for job applications or credit cards; the shocking bastardization

of news media and lack of responsibility thereof; the fetish for style and luxury, not safety, in new cars. . . .

Oh, I went the route.

And when I was done, it took three close friends to keep me from dashing into the bathroom and opening an important vein with the new beep-beep Krona edge.

So I tried a sixth attempt. A personal statement about how crummy it was writing for television, and seeing your best work masticated and grab-assed and garbaged-out by no-talents afraid of their shadows. But that was only a repeat of a speech I made at the World SF Convention last Labor Day, and my attorney warned me if I put it into print (instead of playing it via tape at parties), I'd be sued for roughly eleven million beans. So there was a seventh attempt, in which I commented sagely on the stories in this book.

But let's face it, friends, this book simply ain't gonna change the course of Western Civilization, and Orville Prescott is too busy simpering over Updike to find time for a paperback novelist, so what the hell.

So there is no introduction to this book.

There are some pretty fair science fiction and fantasy stories here, and one or two I particularly like because they say something more than The Mutants Is Coming; if Bensen can wangle the space away from Pyramid's advertising department to cut the latest notification of a Taylor Caldwell or Louis Nizer offering, there may or may not be a photo of me on the back of the book (should you happen to be the sort of good-looking broad who digs writing to weary authors, but need to know they aren't hunchbacked lepers before committing yourself); there is a nice cover; and a fair-traded price.

More than that you can't expect.

After all, Golding doesn't introduce *his* books. Bellow doesn't introduce *his* books. Ike Asimov has proved his virility enough for *all* us science fiction writers. And Ayn Rand is better at karate than *all* of us. So forgive the omission this time. I'll catch you next time around.

You wouldn't have liked an introduction, anyway.

I tend to pomposity in them.

Harlan Ellison
Hollywood, 1965

Late in March of 1965, I was compelled to join twenty-five thousand others, from all corners of the United States, who marched on the then-bastion of bigotry, the then-capitol of corruption, Montgomery, Alabama (though South Boston now holds undisputed title to the designation, Montgomery is still no flowerbed of racial sanity) (but the myth of the "liberal" North sure got the hell shot out of it by the Southies from Irish-redneck Boston).

I was part of the human floodtide they called a "freedom march" that was trying to tell Governor George Wallace that Alabama was not an island, that it was part of the civilized universe, that though we came from New York and California and Illinois and South Dakota we were not "outside agitators," we were fellow human beings who shared the same granfalloon called "Americans," and we were seeking dignity and civil rights for a people shamefully bludgeoned and mistreated for over two centuries. It was a walk through the country of the blind. I've written about it at length elsewhere.

But now it's ten years later and yesterday a friend of mine's sixty-five-year-old mother got mugged and robbed in broad daylight by two black girls. It's ten years later and a girl I once loved very deeply got raped repeatedly, at knife-point, in the back seat of her own car in an empty lot behind a bowling alley in the San Fernando Valley by a black dude who kept at her for seven hours. It's ten years later and Martin Luther King is dead and Super Fly is alive, and what am I to say to Doris Pitkin Buck, who lost her dear and magical Richard on the streets of Washington, D.C. to a pack of black killers who chose to stomp to death a man in his eighties for however much stash-money he might have been carrying?

Do I say to that friend of mine: when they went to drag the Mississippi swamps for the bodies of the civil rights workers Chaney, Schwerner and Goodman they dredged up the bodies of sixteen black men who had been cavalierly murdered and dumped in the muck, and no one even gave a damn, the newspapers didn't even make much of a note of it, that it was the accepted way to handle an "uppity nigger" in the South? Do I say that and hope I've said something rational?

Do I say to that girl I loved: every time you see a mocha-colored

maid or waitress it means her great-great-grandmother was a sexual pin-cushion for some plantation Massa', that rape and indentured bed service was taken for granted for two hundred years and if it was refused there was always a stout length of cordwood to change the girl's thinking? Do I say that and hope I've drawn a reasonable parallel?

Do I tell brave and talented Doris Buck, who never hurt anyone in her life, that we're paying dues for what our ancestors did, that we're reaping the terrible crop of pain and evil and murder committed in the name of White Supremacy, that white men rob and rape and steal and kill as well as black, but that blacks are poorer, more desperate, more frustrated, angrier? Do I say that and hope to stop her tears with logic?

Why the hell do we expect a nobility of blacks that whites never possessed?

Of course I don't say that pack of simple-minded platitudes. Personal pain is incapable of spontaneous remission in the presence of loss. I say nothing.

But my days of White Liberal Guilt are gone. My days of championing whole classes and sexes and pigmentations of people is gone. The Sixties are gone, and we live in the terrible present, where death and guilt don't mix. Now I come, after all these years, to the only position that works: each one on his or her own merits, black/white/yellow/brown. Not all Jews are money-gouging kikes, but some are. Not all blacks are slavering rapists, but some are. Not all Puerto Ricans are midnight second-storey spicks, but some are.

And we come to the question again and again, what kind of a god is it that permits such misery . . . are we truly cast in his image, such an image of cruelty and rapaciousness . . . were we put here really *to suffer such torment? Let the Children of God answer* that *one with something other than no-brain jingoism. Mark Twain said, "If one truly believes there is an all-powerful Deity, and one looks around at the condition of the universe, one is led inescapably to the conclusion that God is a malign thug." That's the quote that caused me to write "The Deathbird." It's a puzzle I cannot reason out.*

I doubt. I have always doubted since the day I read in the Old Testament—the word of God, remember—that there was only Adam

and Eve and Cain and Abel, and then Cain got married. To whom? To Eve? Then don't tell me what a no-no incest is.

Isaac Asimov assures me it's a rational universe, predicated on sanity and order. Yeah? Well, tell me about God. Tell me who He is, why He allows the foulest hyenas of our society to run amuck while decent men and women cower in terror behind Fox locks and Dictograph systems. Tell me about Him. Equate theology with the world in which we live, with William Calley and Kitty Genovese and the people who keep their kids out of school because the new textbooks dare to say Humans are clever descendants of the Ape. No? Having some trouble? Getting ready to write me a letter denouncing me as the AntiChrist? "God in his infinite wisdom" you say? Faith, you urge me? I have faith . . . in people, not Gods.

But perhaps belief is not enough. Perhaps doubt serves the cause more honestly, more boldly. If so, I offer by way of faith

Paingod

TEARS WERE IMPOSSIBLE, yet tears were his heritage. Sorrow was beyond him, yet sorrow was his birthright. Anguish was denied him; even so, anguish was his stock in trade. For Trente, there was no unhappiness; nor was there joy, concern, discomfort, age, time, feeling.

And this was as the Ethos had planned it.

For Trente had been appointed by the Ethos—the race of somewhere/somewhen beings who morally and ethically ruled the universes—as their Paingod. To Trente, who knew neither the tug of time nor the crippling demands of the emotions, fell the forever task of dispensing pain and sorrow to the myriad multitudes of creatures that inhabited the universes. Whether sentient or barely capable of the feeblest unicellular reaction-formation, Trente passed along from his faceted cubicle invisible against the backdrop of the changing

stars, unhappiness and misery in proportions too complexly arrived at to be verbalized.

He was Paingod for the universes, the one who dealt out the tears and the anguish and the soul-wrenching terrors that blighted life from its first moment to its last. Beyond age, beyond death, beyond feeling—lonely and alone in his cubicle—Trente went about his business without concern or pause.

Trente was not the first Paingod, there had been others. They had come before, not too many of them, but a few, and why they no longer held their post was a question Trente had never asked. He was the chosen one from a race that lived almost indefinitely, and his job was to pass along the calibrated and measured dollops of melancholy as prescribed by the Ethos. It involved no feeling and no concern, only attention to duty. It was his position, and it was his obligation. How peculiar it was that he felt concern, after all this time.

It had begun so long before—and of time he had no conception—that the only marking date with validity was that in the great ocean soon to become the Gobi Desert, parameciam had become more prevalent than amoebae. It had grown in him through the centimetered centuries as layers and layers of forever settled down like mist to form the stratum of the past.

Now, it was now.

Despite the strange ache in his nerve-gland, his *central* nerve-gland; despite the progressive dulling of his eye globes; despite the mad thoughts that spit and stuttered through his triple-domed cerebrum, thoughts of which he knew he was incapable; despite all this, Trente performed his now functions as he was required.

He dispensed unbearable anguish to the residents of a third-power planet in the Snail Cluster, supportable agony to a farm colony that had sprung up on Jacopettii U; incredible suffering to a parentless spider-child on Hiydyg IX; and relentless torment to a blameless race of mute aborigines on a nameless, arid planet circling a dying sun of the 707 System.

And through it all, Trente suffered for his charges.

What could not be, was. What could not come to pass, had. The soulless, emotionless, regimented creature that the Ethos had named Paingod, had contracted a sickness. Concern. He cared. At last, after

centuries too filed away to unearth and number, Trente had reached a Now in which he could no longer support his acts.

The physical manifestations of his mental upheaval were numerous. His oblong head throbbed and his eye globes were dulling, a little more each decade; the interlinked duodenal ulcers so necessary to his endocrinal system's normal function had begun to misfire like faulty plugs in an old car; the thwack! of his salamander tail had grown weaker, indicating his motor responses were feebler. Trente—who had always been considered rather a handsome example of his race—had slowly come to look forlorn, weary, even a touch pathetic.

And he sent down woe to an armored, flying creature with a mite-sized brain on a dark planet at the edge of the Coalsack; he dispatched fear and trembling to a smokelike wraith that was the only visible remains of a great race, which had learned to dispense with its bodies centuries before, in the sun known as Vertel; he conscientiously winged terror and unhappiness and misery and sadness to a group of murdering pirates, a clique of shrewd politicians and a brothelful of unregenerate whores—all on a fifth-power planet of the White Horse Constellation.

Stopped alone there, in the night of space, his mind spiralling now for the first time down a strange and disquieting chamber of thought, Trente twisted within himself. I was selected because I lacked the certain difficulties I now manifest. What is this torment? What is this unpleasant, unhappy, unrelenting feeling that gnaws at me, tears at me, corrupts my thoughts, colors darkly my every desire? Am I going mad? Madness is beyond my race; it is a something we have never known. Have I been at this post too long, have I failed in my duties? If there was a God stronger than the God that I am, or a God stronger than the Ethos Gods, then I would appeal to that God. But there is only silence and the night and the stars, and I'm alone, so alone, so God all alone here, doing what I must, doing my best.

And then, finally: I must know. I must *know!*

. . . while he spun a fiber of melancholy down to a double-thoraxed insect-creature on Io, speared with dread a blob of barely sentient mud on Acaras III, pain-goaded into suicide an electrical wave being capable of producing exquisite 15-toned harmonics on Syndon Beta V, reduced by half the pleasures of a pitiable slug thing in the

methane caves of Kkklll IV, enshrouded in bitterness and misery a man named Colin Marshack on an insignificant planet called Sol III, Earth, Terra, the world . . .

And then, finally: I *will* know. I will *know!*

Trente removed the scale model of Earth from the display crate, and stared at it. Such a tiny thing, such a helpless thing, to support the nightwalk of a Paingod.

He selected the most recent recipient of his attentions, since one was as good as another; and using the means of travel his race had long since perfected, he left his encased cubicle hanging translucent against the stars. Trente, Paingod of the universes, for the first time in all the centuries he had lived that life of giving, never receiving, left his place, and left his Now, and went to find out. To find out . . . what? He had no way of knowing.

For the Paingod, it was the first nightwalk.

Pieter Koslek had been born in a dwarf province of a miniscule Central European country long since swallowed up by a tiny power now a member of the Common Market. He had left Europe early in the 1920's, had shipped aboard a freighter to Bolivia, and after working his way as common deckhand and laborer through half a dozen banana republics, had been washed up on an inland shore of the United States in 1934. He had promptly gone to earth, gone to seed, and gone to fat. A short stint in a CCC camp, a shorter stint as a bouncer in a Kansas City speak, a term in the Illinois State Workhouse, a long run on the Pontiac assembly line making an obscure part for an obscure segment of a B-17's innards, a brief fling as owner of a raspberry farm, and an extended period as a skid row-frequenting wino summed up his life. Now, as *now* would be reckoned by any sane man's table, Pieter Koslek was a wet brain—an alcoholic so sunk in the fumes and vapors of his own liquor need that he was barely recognizable as a human being. Lying soddenly, but quietly, in an alley two blocks up from the Greyhound bus station in downtown Los Angeles, Pieter Koslek, age 50, weight 210, hair filth grey, eyes red and moist and closed, unceremoniously died. That simply, that unconcernedly, that uneventfully for all the young-old men in overlong GI surplus overcoats who passed by that alley mouth unseeing, uncaring—Pieter Koslek died. His brain gave out, his

lungs ceased to bellow, his heart refused to pump, his blood slid to a halt in his veins, and the breath no longer passed his lips. He died. End of story, beginning of story.

As he lay there, half-propped against the brick wall with its shredded reminder of a lightweight boxing match between two stumblebums long since passed into obscurity and the files of *Boxing Magazine*, a thin tepid vapor of pale green came to the body of Pieter Koslek; touched it; felt of it; entered it; Trente was on the planet Earth, Sol III.

If it had been possible to mount an epitaph on bronze for the wet brain, there on the wall of the alley perhaps, the most fitting would have been: HERE LAY PIETER KOSLEK. NOTHING IN HIS LIFE BECAME HIM SO MUCH AS THE LEAVING OF IT.

The thick-bodied orator on the empty packing crate had gathered a sizable crowd. His license was encased in plastic, and it had been pinned to a broom handle sharpened and driven into the ground. An American flag hung limply from a pole on the other side of the makeshift podium. The flag had only forty-eight stars; it had been purchased long before Hawaii or Alaska had joined the union, but new flags cost money, and—

"Scum! Like sewer water poured into your bloodstream! Look at them, do they *look* like you, do they *smell* like you—those smells, those, those *stinks* that walk like men! That's what they are, *stinks* with voting privileges, all of them, the niggers, the kike-jews who own the land and the apartments you live in, what they think they're big deals! The spicks, the Puerto Rican filth that takes over your streets and rapes your women and puts its lousy hands on your white young daughters, that scum . . ."

Colin Marshack stood in the crowd, staring up at the thick-bodied orator, his shaking hands thrust deep into his sport jacket pockets, his head throbbing, the unlit cigarette hanging unnoticed from his lips. Every word.

". . . Commies in public office, is what we have got to be content with. Nigger lovers and pawns of the kike bastards who own the corporations. They wanta kill all of you, all of us, every one of us. They want us to say, 'Hey! C'mon, make love to my sister, to my wife, do all the dirty things that'll pollute my pure race!' That's what the

Commies in public office, misusing *our* public trust, say to us. And what do we say in return, back to them, we say, 'No dice, dirty spicks, lousy kikes, Puerto bastards, black men that want to steal our pure heritage!' We say, go to hell to them, go straight to hell, you dirty rotten sonsuh—"

At which point the policemen moved quietly through the crowd, fascinated and silent like cobras at a mongoose convention, and arrested the thick-bodied orator.

As they took him away, Colin Marshack turned and moved out of the milling group. Why is such hideousness allowed to exist, he thought bitterly, fearfully. He walked down the path and out of Pershing Square ("Pershing Square is where they have a fence up so the fruits can't pick the people.") and did not even realize the rheumy-eyed old man was following him till he was six blocks away.

Then he turned, and the old man almost ran into him. "Something I can do for you?" Colin Marshack asked.

The old man grinned feebly, his pale gums exposing themselves above gap-toothed ruin. "Nosir, nuh-nosir, Ise just, uh, I was uh just follerin' along to see maybe I could tap yuh for a coupla cents tuh get some chic'n noodle soup. It's kinda cold . . . 'n I thought, maybe . . ."

Colin Marshack's wide, somehow-humorous face settled into understanding lines. "You're right, old man, it's cold, and it's windy, and it's miserable, and I think you're entitled to some goddam chicken noodle soup. God knows *some*one's entitled." He paused a moment, added, "Maybe me."

He took the old man by the arm, seemingly unaware of the rancid, rotting condition of the cloth. They walked along the street outside the Park, and turned into one of the many side routes littered with one-arm beaneries and forty-cent-a-night flophouses.

"And possibly a hot roast beef sandwich with gravy all over the French fries," Colin added, steering the wine-smelling old derelict into a restaurant.

Over coffee and a bear claw, Colin Marshack stared at the old man. "Hey, what's your name?"

"Pieter Koslek," the old man murmured, hot vapors from the thick white coffee mug rising up before his watery eyes. "I've, uh, been kinda sick, y'know . . ."

"Too much sauce, old man," said Colin Marshack. "Too much

sauce does it for a lot of us. My father and mother both. Nice folk, loved each other, they went to the old alky's home hand-in-hand. It was touching."

"You're kinda feelin' sorry for y'self, ain'tcha?" noted Pieter Koslek and looked down at his coffee hurriedly.

Colin stared across angrily. Had he sunk that low, that even the seediest cockroach-ridden bum in the gutter could snipe at him, talk up to him, see his sad and sorry state? He tried to lift the coffee cup, and the cream-laced liquid sloshed over the rim, over his wrist. He yipped and set the cup down quickly.

"Your hands shake worse'n mine, mister," Pieter Koslek noted. It was a curious tone, somehow devoid of feeling or concern—more a statement of observation.

"Yeah, my hands shake, Mr. Koslek *Sir*. They shake because I make my living cutting things out of stone, and for the past two years I've been unable to get anything from stone but tidy piles of rock-dust."

Koslek spoke around a mouthful of cruller. "You uh you're one'a them statue makers, what I mean a sculpt'r."

"That is precisely what I am, Mr. Koslek Sir. I am a capturer of exquisite beauty in rock and plaster and quartz and marble. The only trouble is, I'm no damned good, and I was never *ever* really very good, but at least I made a decent living selling a piece here and there, and conning myself into thinking I was great and building a career, and even Canaday in the *Times* said a few nice things about me. But even *that's* turned to rust now. I can't make a chisel do what I want it to do, I can't sand and I can't chip and I can't carve dirty words on sidewalks if I try."

Pieter Koslek stared across at Colin Marshack, and there was a banked fire down in those rheumy, sad old eyes. He watched and looked and saw the hands shaking uncontrollably, saw them wring one against another like mad things, and even when interlocked, they still trembled hideously.

And . . .

Trente, locked within an alien shell, comprehended a small something. This creature of puny carbon atoms and other substances that could not exist for an instant in the rigorous arena of space, was dying. Inside, it was ending its life-cycle, because of the misery Trente

had sent down. Trente had been responsible for the quivering pain that sent Colin Marshack's hands into spasms. It had been done two years before—by Colin Marshack's time—but only a few moments earlier as Trente knew it. And now it had changed this creature's life totally. Trente watched the strange human being, a product of little, introverted needs and desires, here on this mudball circling a nothing star in a far outpost of nowhere. And he knew he must go further, must experiment further with his problem. The green and transparent vapor that was Trente seeped out of the eyes of Pieter Koslek, and slid carefully inside Colin Marshack. It left itself wide open, flung itself wide open, to what tremors governed the man. And Trente felt the full impact of the pain he so lightly dispensed to all the living things in the universes. It was potent hot all! And it was a further knowing, a greater knowledge, a simple act that the sickness had compelled him to undertake. By the fear and the memory of all the fears that had gone before, Trente knew, *and knowing, had to go further. For he was Paingod, not a transient tourist in the country of pain. He drew forth the mind of Marshack, of that weak and trembling Colin Marshack, and fled with it. Out. Out there. Further. Much further. Till time came to a slithering halt and space was no longer of any consequence. And he whirled Colin Marshack through the universes. Through the infinite allness of the space and time and motion and meaning that was the crevice into which Life had sunk itself. He saw the blobs of mud and the whirling winged things and the tall humanoids and the cleat-treaded half-men/half-machines that ruled one and another sector of open space. He showed it all to Colin Marshack, drenched him in wonder, filled him like the most vital goblet the Ethos had ever created, poured him full of love and life and the staggering beauty of the cosmos. And having done that, he whirled the soul and spirit of Colin Marshack down, down and down to the fibrous shell that was his body, and poured that soul back inside. Then he walked the shell to the home of Colin Marshack . . . and turned it loose. And . . .*

When the sculptor awoke, lying face down amidst the marble chips and powder-fine dust of the statue, he saw the base first; and not having recalled even buying a chunk of stone that large, raised himself on his hands, and his knees, and his haunches, and sat there, and his eyes went up toward the summit, and seemed to go on forever, and when he finally saw what it was he had created—this

thing of such incredible loveliness and meaning and wisdom—he began to sob. Softly, never very loud, but deeply, as though each whimper was drawn from the very core of him.

He had done it this once, but as he saw his hands still trembling, still murmuring to themselves in spasm, he knew it was the one time he would ever do it. There was no memory of how, or why, or even of when . . . but it was *his* work, of that he was certain. The pains in his wrists told him it was.

The moment of truth stood high above him, resplendent in marble and truth, but there would be no other moments.

This was Colin Marshack's life, in its totality, now.

The sound of sobbing was only broken periodically, as he began to drink.

Waiting. The Ethos waited. Trente had known they would be. It was inevitable. Foolish for him to conceive of a situation in which they would not have an awareness.

Away. From your post, away.

"I had to know. It has been growing in me, a live thing in me. I had to know. It was the only way. I went to a planet, and lived within what they call 'men' and knew. I think I understand now."

Know. What is it you know?

"I know that pain is the most important thing in the universes. Greater than survival, greater than love, greater even than the beauty it brings about. For without pain there can be no pleasure. Without sadness there can be no happiness. Without misery there can be no beauty. And without these, life is endless, hopeless, doomed and damned."

Adult. You have become adult.

"I know . . . this is what became of the other Paingods before me. They grew into concern, into knowing, and then . . ."

Lost. They were lost to us.

"They could not take the step; they could not go to one of the ones to whom they had sent pain, and learn. So they were no use as Paingod. I understood. Now I know, and I am returned."

Do. What will you do?

"I will send more pain than ever before. More and greater."

More? You will send more?

"Much more. And again, more. Because now I understand. It is a grey and a lonely place in which we live, all of us, swinging between desperation and emptiness, and all that makes it worthwhile is caring, is beauty. But if there was no opposite for beauty, if there was no opposite for pleasure, it would all turn to dust, to waste."

Being. Now you know who you are.

"I am most blessed of the Ethos, and most humble. You have given me the highest, kindest position in the universes. For I am the God to all men, and to all creatures small and large, whether they call me by name or not. I am Paingod, and it is my life, however long it stretches, to treat them to the finest they will ever know. To give them pain, that they may know pleasure. Thank you."

And the Ethos went away, secure that at last, after all the eons of Paingods who had broken under the strain, who had lacked the courage to take that nightwalk, they had found one who would last truly forever. Trente had come of age.

While back in the cubicle, hanging star-bright and translucent in space, high above it all, yet very much part of it all, the creature who would never die; the creature who had lived within the rotting body of Pieter Koslek and for a few moments in the soul and talent of Colin Marshack, that creature called Paingod, learned one more thing, as he stared at the tiny model of the planet Earth he had known.

Trente knew the feel of a tear formed in a duct and turned free from an eye globe—cool on his face.

Trente knew happiness.

Now it can be told: my secret vice. Buried deep in the anthracite core of my being is a personal trait so hideous, so confounding, a conceit so terrible in its repercussions, that it makes sodomy, pederasty and barratry on the high seas seem as tame as a Frances Parkinson Keyes novel. I am always late. Invariably. Consistently. If I tell you I'll be there to pick up you at 8:30, expect me Thursday. A positive genius *for tardiness. Paramount sends a car to pick me up when I'm scripting, otherwise they know I'll be off looking at the flowers, or watching the ocean, or reading a copy of* The Amazing Spider-Man *in the bathroom. I have been brought to task for this, on innumerable occasions. It prompted several courts-martial when I was in the Army. I've lost girl friends because of it. So I went to a doctor, to see if there was something wrong with my medulla oblongata, or somesuch. He told me I was always late. His bill was seventy-five dollars. I've decided that unlike most other folk with highly developed senses of the fluidity of time, the permanence of humanity in the chrono-stream, et al, I got no ticktock going up there on top. So I had to explain it to the world, to cop out, as it were, in advance. I wrote the following story as my plea for understanding, extrapolating the (to me) ghastly state of the world around me—in which everyone scampers here and there to be places on time—to a time not too far away (by my watch) in which you get your life docked every time you're late. It is not entirely coincidental that the name of the hero in this minor masterpiece closely resembles that of the author, to wit:*

"Repent, Harlequin!" Said the Ticktockman

THERE ARE ALWAYS those who ask, what is it all about? For those who need to ask, for those who need points sharply made, who need to know "where it's at," this:

"The mass of men serve the state thus, not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies. They are the standing army, and the militia, jailors, constables, posse comitatus, etc. In most cases there is no free exercise whatever of the judgment or of the moral sense; but they put themselves on a level with wood and earth and stones; and wooden men can perhaps be manufactured that will serve the purpose as well. Such command no more respect than men of straw or a lump of dirt. They have the same sort of worth only as horses and dogs. Yet such as these even are commonly esteemed good citizens. Others—as most legislators, politicians, lawyers, ministers, and officeholders—serve the state chiefly with their heads; and, as they rarely make any moral distinctions, they are as likely to serve the Devil, without intending it, as God. A very few, as heroes, patriots, martyrs, reformers in the great sense, and men, *serve the state with their consciences also, and so necessarily resist it for the most part; and they are commonly treated as enemies by it."*

Henry David Thoreau,
CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

That is the heart of it. Now begin in the middle, and later learn the beginning; the end will take care of itself.

But because it was the very world it was, the very world they had allowed it to *become*, for months his activities did not come to the alarmed attention of The Ones Who Kept The Machine Functioning Smoothly, the ones who poured the very best butter over the cams and mainsprings of the culture. Not until it had become obvious that somehow, someway, he had become a notoriety, a celebrity, perhaps even a hero for (what Officialdom inescapably tagged) "an emotionally disturbed segment of the populace," did they turn it over to the Ticktockman and his legal machinery. But by then, because it was the very world it was, and they had no way to predict he would happen—possibly a strain of disease long-defunct, now, suddenly, reborn in a system where immunity had been forgotten, had lapsed—he had been allowed to become too real. Now he had form and substance.

He had become a *personality*, something they had filtered out of the system many decades before. But there it was, and there *he* was, a

very definitely imposing personality. In certain circles—middle-class circles—it was thought disgusting. Vulgar ostentation. Anarchistic. Shameful. In others, there was only sniggering: those strata where thought is subjugated to form and ritual, niceties, proprieties. But down below, ah, down below, where the people always needed their saints and sinners, their bread and circuses, their heroes and villains, he was considered a Bolivar; a Napoleon; a Robin Hood; a Dick Bong (Ace of Aces); a Jesus; a Jomo Kenyatta.

And at the top—where, like socially-attuned Shipwreck Kellys, every tremor and vibration threatens to dislodge the wealthy, powerful and tilted from their flagpoles—he was considered a menace; a heretic; a rebel; a disgrace; a peril. He was known down the line, to the very heart-meat core, but the important reactions were high above and far below. At the very top, at the very bottom.

So his file was turned over, along with his time-card and his cardioplate, to the office of Ticktockman.

The Ticktockman: very much over six feet tall, often silent, a soft purring man when things went timewise. The Ticktockman.

Even in the cubicles of the hierarchy, where fear was generated, seldom suffered, he was called the Ticktockman. But no one called him that to his mask.

You don't call a man a hated name, not when that man, behind his mask, is capable of revoking the minutes, the hours, the days and nights, the years of your life. He was called the Master Timekeeper to his mask. It was safer that way.

"This is *what* he is," said the Ticktockman with genuine softness, "but not *who* he is. This time-card I'm holding in my left hand has a name on it, but it is the name of *what* he is, not *who* he is. The cardioplate here in my right hand is also named, but not *whom* named, merely *what* named. Before I can exercise proper revocation, I have to know *who* this *what* is."

To his staff, all the ferrets, all the loggers, all the finks, all the commex, even the mineez, he said, "Who is this Harlequin?"

He was not purring smoothly. Timewise, it was jangle.

However, it *was* the longest speech they had ever heard him utter at one time, the staff, the ferrets, the loggers, the finks, the commex, but not the mineez, who usually weren't around to know, in any case. But even they scurried to find out.

Who is the Harlequin?

High above the third level of the city, he crouched on the humming aluminum-frame platform of the air-boat (foof! air-boat, indeed! swizzleskid is what it was, with a tow-rack jerry-rigged) and he stared down at the neat Mondrian arrangement of the buildings.

Somewhere nearby, he could hear the metronomic left-right-left of the 2:47 P.M. shift, entering the Timkin roller-bearing plant in their sneakers. A minute later, precisely, he heard the softer right-left-right of the 5:00 A.M. formation, going home.

An elfin grin spread across his tanned features, and his dimples appeared for a moment. Then, scratching at his thatch of auburn hair, he shrugged within his motley, as though girding himself for what came next, and threw the joystick forward, and bent into the wind as the airboat dropped. He skimmed over a slidewalk, purposely dropping a few feet to crease the tassels of the ladies of fashion, and—inserting thumbs in large ears—he stuck out his tongue, rolled his eyes and went wugga-wugga-wugga. It was a minor diversion. One pedestrian skittered and tumbled, sending parcels everywhichway, another wet herself, a third keeled slantwise and the walk was stopped automatically by the servitors till she could be resuscitated. It was a minor diversion.

Then he swirled away on a vagrant breeze, and was gone. Hi-ho.

As he rounded the cornice of the Time-Motion Study Building, he saw the shift, just boarding the slidewalk. With practiced motion and an absolute conservation of movement, they side-stepped up onto the slow-strip and (in a chorus line reminiscent of a Busby Berkeley film of the antediluvian 1930s) advanced across the strips ostrich-walking till they were lined upon the expresstrip.

Once more, in anticipation, the elfin grin spread, and there was a tooth missing back there on the left side. He dipped, skimmed, and swooped over them; and then, scrunching about on the air-boat, he released the holding pins that fastened shut the ends of the home-made pouring troughs that kept his cargo from dumping prematurely. And as he pulled the trough-pins, the air-boat slid over the factory workers and one hundred and fifty thousand dollars worth of jelly beans cascaded down on the expresstrip.

Jelly beans! Millions and billions of purples and yellows and greens

and licorice and grape and raspberry and mint and round and smooth and crunchy outside and soft-mealy inside and sugary and bouncing jouncing tumbling clittering clattering skittering fell on the heads and shoulders and hardhats and carapaces of the Timkin workers, tinkling on the slidewalk and bouncing away and rolling about underfoot and filling the sky on their way down with all the colors of joy and childhood and holidays, coming down in a steady rain, a solid wash, a torrent of color and sweetness out of the sky from above, and entering a universe of sanity and metronomic order with quite-mad coocoo newness. Jelly beans!

The shift workers howled and laughed and were pelted, and broke ranks, and the jelly beans managed to work their way into the mechanism of the slidewalks after which there was a hideous scraping as the sound of a million fingernails rasped down a quarter of a million blackboards, followed by a coughing and a sputtering, and then the slidewalks all stopped and everyone was dumped thisawayandthataway in a jackstraw tumble, still laughing and popping little jelly bean eggs of childish color into their mouths. It was a holiday, and a jollity, an absolute insanity, a giggle. But . . .

The shift was delayed seven minutes.

They did not get home for seven minutes.

The master schedule was thrown off by seven minutes.

Quotas were delayed by inoperative slidewalks for seven minutes.

He had tapped the first domino in the line, and one after another, like chik chik chik, the others had fallen.

The System had been seven minutes worth of disrupted. It was a tiny matter, one hardly worthy of note, but in a society where the single driving force was order and unity and equality and promptness and clocklike precision and attention to the clock, reverence of the gods of the passage of time, it was a disaster of major importance.

So he was ordered to appear before the Ticktockman. It was broadcast across every channel of the communications web. He was ordered to be *there* at 7:00 dammit on time. And they waited, and they waited, but he didn't show up till almost ten-thirty, at which time he merely sang a little song about moonlight in a place no one had ever heard of, called Vermont, and vanished again. But they had all been waiting since seven, and it wrecked *hell* with their schedules. So the question remained: Who is the Harlequin?

But the *unasked* question (more important of the two) was: how did we get *into* this position, where a laughing, irresponsible japer of jabberwocky and jive could disrupt our entire economic and cultural life with a hundred and fifty thousand dollars worth of jelly beans . . .

Jelly for God's sake *beans!* This is madness! Where did he get the money to buy a hundred and fifty thousand dollars worth of jelly beans? (They knew it would have cost that much, because they had a team of Situation Analysts pulled off another assignment, and rushed to the slidewalk scene to sweep up and count the candies, and produce findings, which disrupted *their* schedules and threw their entire branch at least a day behind.) Jelly beans! Jelly . . . *beans?* Now wait a second—a second accounted for—no one has manufactured jelly beans for over a hundred years. Where did he get jelly beans?

That's another good question. More than likely it will never be answered to your complete satisfaction. But then, how many questions ever are?

The middle you know. Here is the beginning. How it starts:

A desk pad. Day for day, and turn each day. 9:00—open the mail. 9:45—appointment with planning commission board. 10:30—discuss installation progress charts with J.L. 11:45—pray for rain. 12:00—lunch. *And so it goes.*

"I'm sorry, Miss Grant, but the time for interviews was set at 2:30, and it's almost five now. I'm sorry you're late, but those are the rules. You'll have to wait till next year to submit application for this college again." *And so it goes.*

The 10:10 local stops at Cresthaven, Galesville, Tonawanda Junction, Selby and Farnhurst, but not at Indiana City, Lucasville and Colton, except on Sunday. The 10:35 express stops at Galesville, Selby and Indiana City, except on Sundays & Holidays, at which time it stops at . . . *and so it goes.*

"I couldn't wait, Fred. I had to be at Pierre Cartain's by 3:00, and you said you'd meet me under the clock in the terminal at 2:45, and you weren't there, so I had to go on. You're always late, Fred. If you'd been there, we could have sewed it up together, but as it was, well, I took the order alone . . ." *And so it goes.*

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Atterley: in reference to your son Gerold's

constant tardiness, I am afraid we will have to suspend him from school unless some more reliable method can be instituted guaranteeing he will arrive at his classes on time. Granted he is an exemplary student, and his marks are high, his constant flouting of the schedules of this school makes it impractical to maintain him in a system where the other children seem capable of getting where they are supposed to be on time *and so it goes.*

YOU CANNOT VOTE UNLESS YOU APPEAR AT 8:45 A.M.

"I don't care if the script is *good,* I need it Thursday!"

CHECK-OUT TIME IS 2:00 P.M.

"You got here late. The job's taken. Sorry."

YOUR SALARY HAS BEEN DOCKED FOR TWENTY MINUTES TIME LOST.

"God, what time is it, I've gotta run!"

And so it goes. And so it goes. And so it goes. And so it goes goes goes goes goes tick tock tick tock tick tock and one day we no longer let time serve us, we serve time and we are slaves of the schedule, worshippers of the sun's passing; bound into a life predicated on restrictions because the system will not function if we don't keep the schedule tight.

Until it becomes more than a minor inconvenience to be late. It becomes a sin. Then a crime. Then a crime punishable by this:

EFFECTIVE 15 JULY 2389 12:00:00 midnight, the office of the Master Timekeeper will require all citizens to submit their timecards and cardioplates for processing. In accordance with Statute 555-7-SGH-999 governing the revocation of time per capita, all cardioplates will be keyed to the individual holder and—

What they had done, was to devise a method of curtailing the amount of life a person could have. If he was ten minutes late, he lost ten minutes of his life. An hour was proportionately worth more revocation. If someone was consistently tardy, he might find himself, on a Sunday night, receiving a communique from the Master Timekeeper that his time had run out, and he would be "turned off" at high noon on Monday, please straighten your affairs, sir, madame or bisex.

And so, by this simple scientific expedient (utilizing a scientific process held dearly secret by the Ticktockman's office) the System was maintained. It was the only expedient thing to do. It was, after

all, patriotic. The schedules had to be met. After all, there *was* a war on!

But, wasn't there always?

"Now that is really disgusting," the Harlequin said, when Pretty Alice showed him the wanted poster. "Disgusting and *highly* improbable. After all, this isn't the days of desperadoes. A *wanted* poster!"

"You know," Pretty Alice noted, "you speak with a great deal of inflection."

"I'm sorry," said the Harlequin, humbly.

"No need to be sorry. You're always saying 'I'm sorry.' You have such massive guilt, Everett, it's really very sad."

"I'm sorry," he repeated, then pursed his lips so the dimples appeared momentarily. He hadn't wanted to say that at all. "I have to go out again. I have to *do* something."

Pretty Alice slammed her coffee-bulb down on the counter. "Oh for God's *sake*, Everett, can't you stay home just *one* night! Must you always be out in that ghastly clown suit, running around an*noy*ing people?"

"I'm—" He stopped, and clapped the jester's hat onto his auburn thatch with a tiny tingling of bells. He rose, rinsed out his coffee-bulb at the spray, and put it into the drier for a moment. "I have to go."

She didn't answer. The faxbox was purring, and she pulled a sheet out, read it, threw it toward him on the counter, "It's about you. Of course. You're ridiculous."

He read it quickly. It said the Ticktockman was trying to locate him. He didn't care, he was going out to be late again. At the door, dredging for an exit line, he hurled back petulantly, "Well, *you* speak with inflection, *too!*"

Pretty Alice rolled her pretty eyes heavenward. "You're ridiculous." The Harlequin stalked out, slamming the door, which sighed shut softly, and locked itself.

There was a gentle knock, and Pretty Alice got up with an exhalation of exasperated breath, and opened the door. He stood there. "I'll be back about ten-thirty, okay?"

She pulled a rueful face. "Why do you tell me that? Why? You

know you'll be late! You *know it!* You're *always* late, so why do you tell me these dumb things?" She closed the door.

On the other side, the Harlequin nodded to himself. *She's right. She's always right. I'll be late. I'm always late. Why do I tell her these dumb things?*

He shrugged again, and went off to be late once more.

He had fired off the firecracker rockets that said: I will attend the 115th annual International Medical Association Invocation at 8:00 P.M. precisely. I do hope you will all be able to join me.

The words had burned in the sky, and of course the authorities were there, lying in wait for him. They assumed, naturally, that he would be late. He arrived twenty minutes early, while they were setting up the spiderwebs to trap and hold him. Blowing a large bullhorn, he frightened and unnerved them so, their own moisturized encirclement webs sucked closed, and they were hauled up, kicking and shrieking, high above the amphitheater's floor. The Harlequin laughed and laughed, and apologized profusely. The physicians, gathered in solemn conclave, roared with laughter, and accepted the Harlequin's apologies with exaggerated bowing and posturing, and a merry time was had by all, who thought the Harlequin was a regular foofaraw in fancy pants; all, that is, but the authorities, who had been sent out by the office of the Ticktockman; they hung there like so much dockside cargo, hauled up above the floor of the amphitheater in a most unseemly fashion.

(In another part of the same city where the Harlequin carried on his "activities," totally unrelated in every way to what concerns us here, save that it illustrates the Ticktockman's power and import, a man named Marshall Delahanty received his turn-off notice from the Ticktockman's office. His wife received the notification from the gray-suited minee who delivered it, with the traditional "look of sorrow" plastered hideously across his face. She knew what it was, even without unsealing it. It was a billet-doux of immediate recognition to everyone these days. She gasped, and held it as though it were a glass slide tinged with botulism, and prayed it was not for her. Let it be for Marsh, she thought, brutally, realistically, or one of the kids, but not for me, please dear God, not for me. And then she opened it,

and it *was* for Marsh, and she was at one and the same time horrified and relieved. The next trooper in the line had caught the bullet. "Marshall," she screamed, "Marshall! Termination, Marshall! OhmiGod, Marshall, whattl we do, whattl we do, Marshall omigod-marshall . . ." and in their home that night was the sound of tearing paper and fear, and the stink of madness went up the flue and there was nothing, absolutely nothing they could do about it.

(But Marshall Delahanty tried to run. And early the next day, when turn-off time came, he was deep in the Canadian forest two hundred miles away, and the office of the Ticktockman blanked his cardio-plate, and Marshall Delahanty keeled over, running, and his heart stopped, and the blood dried up on its way to his brain, and he was dead that's all. One light went out on the sector map in the office of the Master Timekeeper, while notification was entered for fax reproduction, and Georgette Delahanty's name was entered on the dole roles till she could remarry. Which is the end of the footnote, and all the point that need be made, except don't laugh, because that is what would happen to the Harlequin if ever the Ticktockman found out his real name. It isn't funny.)

The shopping level of the city was thronged with the Thursday-colors of the buyers. Women in canary yellow chitons and men in pseudo-Tyrolean outfits that were jade and leather and fit very tightly, save for the balloon pants.

When the Harlequin appeared on the still-being-constructed shell of the new Efficiency Shopping Center, his bullhorn to his elfishly-laughing lips, everyone pointed and stared, and he berated them:

"Why let them order you about? Why let them tell you to hurry and scurry like ants or maggots? Take your time! Saunter a while! Enjoy the sunshine, enjoy the breeze, let life carry you at your own pace! Don't be slaves of time, it's a helluva way to die, slowly, by degrees . . . down with the Ticktockman!"

Who's the nut? Most of the shoppers wanted to know. Who's the nut oh wow I'm gonna be late I gotta run. . . .

And the construction gang on the Shopping Center received an urgent order from the office of the Master Timekeeper that the dangerous criminal known as the Harlequin was atop their spire, and their aid was urgently needed in apprehending him. The work crew said no, they would lose time on their construction schedule, but the

Ticktockman managed to pull the proper threads of governmental webbing, and they were told to cease work and catch that nitwit up there on the spire; up there with the bullhorn. So a dozen and more burly workers began climbing into their construction platforms, releasing the a-gray plates, and rising toward the Harlequin.

After the debacle (in which, through the Harlequin's attention to personal safety, no one was seriously injured), the workers tried to reassemble, and assault him again, but it was too late. He had vanished. It had attracted quite a crowd, however, and the shopping cycle was thrown off by hours, simply hours. The purchasing needs of the system were therefore falling behind, and so measures were taken to accelerate the cycle for the rest of the day, but it got bogged down and speeded up and they sold too many float-valves and not nearly enough wegglers, which meant that the popli ratio was off, which made it necessary to rush cases and cases of spoiling Smash-O to stores that usually needed a case only every three or four hours. The shipments were bollixed, the transshipments were misrouted, and in the end, even the swizzleskid industries felt it.

"Don't come back till you have him!" the Ticktockman said, very quietly, very sincerely, extremely dangerously.

They used dogs. They used probes. They used cardioplate cross-offs. They used teepers. They used bribery. They used stiktytes. They used intimidation. They used torment. They used torture. They used finks. They used cops. They used search&seizure. They used fallaron. They used betterment incentive. They used fingerprints. They used the Bertillon system. They used cunning. They used guile. They used treachery. They used Raoul Mitgong, but he didn't help much. They used applied physics. They used techniques of criminology.

And what the hell: they caught him.

After all, his name was Everett C. Marm, and he wasn't much to begin with, except a man who had no sense of time.

"Repent, Harlequin!" said the Ticktockman.

"Get stuffed!" the Harlequin replied, sneering.

"You've been late a total of sixty-three years, five months, three

weeks, two days, twelve hours, forty-one minutes, fifty-nine seconds, point oh three six one one one microseconds. You've used up everything you can, and more. I'm going to turn you off."

"Scare someone else. I'd rather be dead than live in a dumb world with a bogeyman like you."

"It's my job."

"You're full of it. You're a tyrant. You have no right to order people around and kill them if they show up late."

"You can't adjust. You can't fit in."

"Unstrap me, and I'll fit my fist into your mouth."

"You're a non-conformist."

"That didn't used to be a felony."

"It is now. Live in the world around you."

"I hate it. It's a terrible world."

"Not everyone thinks so. Most people enjoy order."

"I don't, and most of the people I know don't."

"That's not true. How do you think we caught you?"

"I'm not interested."

"A girl named Pretty Alice told us who you were."

"That's a lie."

"It's true. You unnerve her. She wants to belong, she wants to conform, I'm going to turn you off."

"Then do it already, and stop arguing with me."

"I'm not going to turn you off."

"You're an idiot!"

"Repent, Harlequin!" said the Ticktockman.

"Get stuffed."

So they sent him to Coventry. And in Coventry they worked him over. It was just like what they did to Winston Smith in *1984*, which was a book none of them knew about, but the techniques are really quite ancient, and so they did it to Everett C. Marm, and one day quite a long time later, the Harlequin appeared on the communications web, appearing elfin and dimpled and bright-eyed, and not at all brainwashed, and he said he had been wrong, that it was a good, a very good thing indeed, to belong, to be right on time hip-ho and away we go, and everyone stared up at him on the public screens that covered an entire city block, and they said to themselves, well, you see, he was just a nut after all, and if that's the way the system is run,

then let's do it that way, because it doesn't pay to fight city hall, or in this case, the Ticktockman. So Everett C. Marm was destroyed, which was a loss, because of what Thoreau said earlier, but you can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs, and in every revolution a few die who shouldn't, but they have to, because that's the way it happens, and if you make only a little change, then it seems to be worthwhile. Or, to make the point lucidly:

"Uh, excuse me, sir, I, uh, don't know how to uh, to uh, tell you this, but you were three minutes late. The schedule is a little, uh, bit off."

He grinned sheepishly.

"That's ridiculous!" murmured the Ticktockman behind his mask. "Check your watch." And then he went into his office, going mrmee, mrmee, mrmee, mrmee.

Madness is in the eye of the beholder.

Having done exhaustive research on sociopathic behavior for a two-hour NBC dramatic special recently, I won't give you the faintest murmur of an objection that there are freaks and whackos walking the streets; they're as liable to shoot you dead for chuckles as they are to assist you in getting your stalled car moving out of the intersection. One reliable estimate of the number of potential psychomotor epileptics undetected in our midst is 250,000 in the United States alone. And if you've read Michael Crichton's THE TERMINAL MAN you know that the "brain storm" caused by psychomotor epilepsy can turn a normal human being into a psychopathic killer in moments. No, I won't argue: there are madfolk among us.

But the madness of which I speak is what the Late George Apley might have called "eccentricity." The behavioral pattern outside the accepted norm. Whatever the hell that might be. The little old man sitting on the park bench having an animated conversation with himself. The girl who likes to dress as an exact replica of Betty Boop. The young guy out on the sidewalk playing an ocarina and interspersing his recital with denunciations of the city power and water authority. The old lady who dies in her two-room flat and the cops find sixty years' worth of old newspapers plus two hundred thousand dollars in a cigar box. (One of the wooden ones, the old ones you simply can't find any more because they don't make them. They're great for storing old photos and comic character buttons. If you have one you don't want, send it along to me, willya?) The staid businessman who gets off by wearing his wife's pantyhose. The little kid who puts a big "S" on a bath towel and, shouting, "Up, up and awaaayyy!" jumps off the garage roof.

They're not nuts, friends, they're simply seeing it all through different eyes. They have imagination, and they know something about being alone, and in pain. They're altering the real world to fit their fantasies. That's okay.

We all do it. Don't say you don't. How many of you have come out of the movie, having seen Bullitt *or* The French Connection *or* Vanishing Point *or* The Last American Hero *or* Freebie and the Bean,

gotten in your car, and just about done a wheelie, sixty-five mph out of the parking lot? Don't lie to me, gentle reader, we all *have weird-looking mannerisms that seem perfectly rational to us, but make onlookers cock an eyebrow and cross to the other side of the street.*

I've grown very fond of people who can let it out, who can have the strength of compulsion to indulge their special affectations. They seem to me more real than the faceless gray hordes of sidewalk sliders who go from there to here without so much as a hop, skip or a jump.

One morning in New York last year, I was having a drug store breakfast with Nancy Weber, who wrote THE LIFE SWAP. We were sitting up at the counter, on revolving stools, chewing down greasy eggs and salty bacon, talking about how many dryads can live in a banyan tree, when the front door of the drug store (the now-razed, much-lamented, lovely Henry Halper's on the corner of 56th and Madison, torn down to build, I suppose, an esthetically-enchanting parking structure or candidate for a towering inferno) opened, and in stormed a little old man in an overcoat much too heavy for the weather. He boiled in like a monsoon, stood in the middle of the room and began to pillory Nixon and his resident offensive line of thugs for double-teaming Democracy. He was brilliant. Never repeated himself once. And this was long before the crash of Nixon off his pedestal. Top of his lungs. Flamboyant rhetoric. Utter honesty, no mickeymouse, corruption and evil aflower in the land of the free! On and on he went, as everyone stared dumbfounded. And then, without even a bow to the box seats, out he went, a breath of fresh air in a muggy world. I sat there with a grin on my face only a tape measure could have recorded. I applauded. Superduper! Nancy dug it, I dug it, and a bespectacled gentleman three down from us–burnt toast ignored–dug it. The rest of the people vacillated between outrage and confusion, finally settling on attitudes best described by a circling finger toward the right ear. They thought he was bananas. Well, maybe, but what a **swell** *madness!*

Or take my bed, for instance.

When you come into my bedroom, you see the bed up on a square box platform covered with deep pile carpeting. It's in bright colors, because I like *bright colors. Now, there's a very good, solid, rational reason why the bed is up there like that. Some day I'll tell you why; it's a personal reason; in the nature of killing evil shadows. But that isn't*

important, right here. What is important is the attitude of people who see that bed for the first time. Some snicker and call it an altar. Others frown in disapproval and call it a pedestal, or a Playboy *bed. It's none of those. It's very functional, and serves an emotional purpose that is none of their business, but lord how quick they are to label it the way they see it, and to lay* **their** *value-judgment on it, and me. Most of the time I don't bother explaining. It isn't worth it.*

But it happens all the time, and every time it happens I think about this story. Madness is in the eye of the beholder. What seems cuckoo to you may be rigorously logical to someone else. Remember that as you read.

The Crackpots

HE WAS STANDING ON A STREET CORNER, wearing a long orange nightgown and a red slumber-cap with a tassel. He was studiously picking his nose.

"Watch him!" cried Furth. "Watch what he does! Get the technique accurately!"

For this I studied four years to become an expert? thought Themus.

Furth looked at the younger man for the first time in several minutes. "Are you watching him?" The elder Watcher nudged his companion, causing Themus' dictobox to bump unceremoniously against his chest.

"Yes, yes, I'm watching," answered Themus, "but what possible reason could there be to watch a lunatic picking his nose on a public street corner?" Annoyance rang in his voice.

Furth swung on him, his eyes cold-steel. "You *watch* them, that's your job. And don't ever forget that! And dictate it into that box strapped to your stupid shoulders. If I ever catch you failing to notice and dictate what they're doing, I'll have you shipped back to Central and then into the Mines. You understand what I'm saying?"

Themus nodded dumbly, the attack having shocked and surprised him, so sudden and intensive was it.

He watched the Crackpot.

His stomach felt uneasy. His voice quavered as he described in minute detail, as he had been taught, the procedure. It made his nose itch. He ignored it. Soon the Crackpot gave a little laugh, did a small dance step, and skipped out of sight across the street and around the corner.

Themus spoke into the Communicator-Attachment on his box: "Watcher, sector seventy, here. Male, orange nightgown, red slumber-cap, coming your way. Pick him up, sixty-nine. He's all yours. Over."

An acknowledging buzz came from the Attachment, Themus said, "Out here," and turned the Attachment off.

Furth, who had been dictating the detailed tying of a can on the tail of a four-legged Kyben dog by a tall, bald Crackpot, concluded his report as the dog ran off barking wildly, muttered, "Off," into the dicto-box and turned once more to Themus. The younger Watcher tightened inside. *Here it comes.*

Unexpectedly, the senior Watcher's voice was quiet, almost gentle. "Come with me, Themus, I want to talk with you."

They strode through the street of Valasah, capital of Kyba, watching the other branch of Kyben. The native Kyben, those who put light-tubes in their mouths and twisted their ears in expectation of fluorescence, those who pulled their teeth with adjusto-wrenches, those who sat and scribbled odd messages on the sidewalks, called the armor-dressed Kyben "Stuffed-Shirts." The governing Kyben, those with the armor and high-crested metal helmets bearing the proud emblem of the eye-and-eagle, called their charges, "Crackpots."

They were both Kyben.

There was a vast difference.

Furth was about to delineate the difference to his new aide. The senior Watcher's great-cape swirled in a rain of black as he turned into the Pub-crawler.

At a table near the front, Furth pulled his cape about his thighs and sat down, motioning Themus to the other chair.

The waiter walked slowly over to them, yawning behind his hand. Furth dictated the fact briefly. The waiter gave a high-pitched maniacal laugh. Themus felt his blood chill. These people were all mad, absolutely mad.

"Two glasses of *greth,*" Furth said.

The waiter left. Furth recorded the fact. The waiter had kicked him before he had gone behind the bar.

When the drinks arrived, Furth took a long pull from the helix-shaped glass, slumped back, folded his hands on the table and said, "What did you learn at Academy-Central?"

The question took Themus by surprise. "Wh-what do you mean? I learned a great many things."

"Such as? Tell me."

"Well, there was primary snooping, both conscious and subconscious evaluation, reportage—four full years of it—shorthand, applied dictology, history, manners, customs, authority evaluation, mechanics, fact assemblage . . ."

He found the subjects leaping to the front of his mind, tumbling from his lips. He had been second in his class of twelve hundred, and it had all stuck.

Furth cut him off with a wave of his hand. "Let's take that history. Capsule it for me."

Furth was a big man, eyes oddly set far back in hollows above deep yellow cheeks, hair white about the temples, a lean and electric man, the type who radiates energy even when asleep. Themus suspected this was his superior's way of testing him. He recited:

"The Corps is dedicated to gathering data. It will Watch and detect, assimilate and file. Nothing will escape the gaze of the Watcher. As the eagle soars, so the eye of the Watcher will fly to all things."

"God, *no,* man, I mean the *History!* The *History.*" The elder Watcher precision-tapped his fingers one after another in irritation. "What is the story of the Kyben. Of Kyba itself. Of your job here. What is our relation to these?"

He waved his hand, taking in the bar, the people in the streets, the entire planet and its twin suns blazing yellow in the afternoon sky.

Themus licked his thin lips, "The Kyben rule the Galaxy—is that what you want?" He breathed easier as the older man nodded. He continued, by rote: "The Kyben rule the Galaxy. They are the organizers. All other races realize the superior reasoning and administrative powers of the Kyben, and thus allow the Kyben to rule the Galaxy."

He stopped, biting his lower lip, "With your permission, Superior, can I do this some other way? Back at Academy-Central memorization was required, even on Penares it seemed apropos, but somehow—*here*—it sounds foolish to me. No disrespect intended, you understand, I'd just like to ramble it off quickly. I gather all you want are the basics."

The older man nodded his head for Themus to continue in any fashion he chose.

"We are a power, and all the others are too scared of us to try usurping because we run it all better than any ten of them could, and the only trouble is with the Earthmen and the Mawson Confederation, with whom we are negotiating right now. The only thing we have against us is this planet of black sheep relatives. They happen to be our people, but we left them some eleven hundred years ago because they were a pain in the neck and the Kyben realized they had a universe to conquer, and we wish we could get rid of them, because they're all quite mad, and if anyone finds out about them, we'll lose prestige, and besides they're a nuisance."

He found himself out of breath after the long string of phrases, and he stopped for a second. "There isn't a sane person on this planet, which isn't strange because all the 4-Fs were left when our ancestors took to space. In the eleven hundred years we've been running the Galaxy, these Crackpots have created a culture of imbecility for themselves. The Watcher garrison is maintained, to make sure the lunatics don't escape and damage our position with the other worlds around us.

"If you have a black sheep relative, you either put him away under surveillance so he can't bother you, or you have him exterminated. Since we aren't barbarians like the Earthmen, we keep the madmen here, and watch them full time."

He stopped, realizing he had covered the subject quite well, and because he saw the sour expression on Furth's face.

"That's what they taught you at Academy-Central?" asked the senior Watcher.

"That's about it, except that Watcher units are all over the Galaxy, from Penares to Kyba, from the home planet to our furthest holding, doing a job for which they were trained and which no other order could do. Performing an invaluable service to all Kyben, from

Kyben-Central outward to the edges of our exploration."

"Then don't you ever forget it, hear?" snapped Furth, leaning quickly across to the younger man. "Don't you ever let it slip out of your mind. If anything happens while you're awake and on the scene, and you miss it, no matter how insignificant, you'll wind up in the Mines." As if to illustrate his point, he clicked the dicto-box to "on" and spoke briefly into it, keeping his eyes on a girl neatly pouring the contents of a row of glasses on the bar's floor and eating the glasses, all but the stems, which she left lying in an orderlyin pile.

He concluded, and leaned back toward Themus, pointing a stubby finger. "You've got a soft job here, boy. Ten years as a Watcher and you can retire. Back to a nice cozy apartment in a Project at Kyben-Central or any other planet you choose, with anyone you choose, doing anything you choose—within the bounds of the Covenant, of course. You're lucky you made it into the Corps. Many a mother's son would *give* his mother to be where you are."

He lifted the helix-glass to his lips and drained it.

Themus sat, scratched his nose, and watched the purple liquid disappear.

It was his first day on Kyba, his Superior had straightened him out, he knew his place, he knew his job. Everything was clean and top-notch.

Somehow he was miserable.

Themus looked at himself. At himself as he knew he was, not as he thought he was. This was a time for realities, not for wishful thinking.

He was twenty-three, average height, blue hair, blue eyes, light complexion—just a bit lighter than the average gold-color of his people—superior intelligence, and with the rigid, logical mind of his kind. He was an accepted Underclass member of the Watcher Corps with a year of intern work at Penares-Base and an immediate promotion to Kyba, which was acknowledged the soft spot before retirement. For a man as new to the Corps as Themus' five years made him, this was a remarkable thing, and explainable only by his quick and brilliant dictographic background.

He was a free man, a quick man with a dicto-box, a good-looking man, and unfortunately, an unhappy man.

He was confused by it all.

His summation of himself was suddenly shattered by the rest of his squad's entrance into the common-room, voices pitched on a dozen different levels.

They came through the sliding doors, jostling and joking with one another, all tall and straight, all handsome and intelligent.

"You should have seen the one I got yesterday," said one man, zipping up his chest-armor. "He was sitting in the Dog's-Skull—you know, that little place on the corner of Bremen and Gabrett—with a bowl of noodle soup in front of him, tying the things together." The rest of the speaker's small group laughed uproariously. "When I asked him what he was doing, he said, 'I'm a noddle-knitter, stupid.' *He* called *me* stupid! A noodle-knitter!" He elbowed the Underclassman next to him in the ribs and they both roared with laughter.

Across the room, strapping his dicto-box to his chest one of the elder Underclassmen was studiously holding court.

"The worst ones are the psychos, gentlemen. I assure you, from six years service here, that they take every prize ever invented. They are destructive, confusing, and elaborate to record. I recall one who was stacking *juba*-fruits in a huge pyramid in front of the library on Hemmorth Court. I watched him for seven hours, then suddenly he leaped up, bellowing, kicking the whole thing over, threw himself through a shop-front, attacked a woman shopping in the store, and finally came to rest exhausted in the gutter. It was a twenty-eight minute record, and I assure you it stretched my ability to quick-dictate. If he had . . ."

Themus lost the train of the fellow's description. The talks were going on all over the common-room as the squad prepared to go out. His was one of three hundred such squads, all over the city, shifted every four hours of the thirty-two hour day so there was no section of the city left untended. Few, if any, things escaped the notice of the Watcher Corps.

He pulled on his soft-soled jump-boots, buckled his dicto-box about him, and moved into the briefing room for instructions.

The rows of seats were fast filling up, and Themus hurried down the aisle.

Furth, dressed in an off-duty suit of plastic body armor with

elaborate scrollwork embossed on it, and the traditional black great-cape, was seated with legs neatly crossed at the front of the room, on a slightly raised podium.

Themus took a seat next to the Watcher named Elix, one who had been chortling over an escapade with a pretty female Crackpot. Themus found himself looking at the other as though he were a mirror image. *Odd how so many of us look alike*, he thought. Then he caught himself. It was a ridiculous thought, and an incorrect one, of course. It was not that they looked alike, it was merely that the Kyben had found for themselves a central line, a median, to which they conformed. It was so much more logical and rewarding that way. If your brother looks and act as you do, you can predict him. If you can predict him, efficiency will follow.

Only these Crackpots defied prediction. Madmen!

"There are two current items on our orders of business today, gentlemen," Furth announced, rising.

Note pads and styli appeared as though by magic, but Furth shook his head and indicated they were not needed.

"No, these aren't memoranda, gentlemen. The first is a problem of discipline. The second is an alert." There was a restless murmur in the room, and Themus glanced around to see uneasiness on many faces. What could it be?

"The problem of discipline is simply—" he pointed at Elix seated beside Themus, "—such of your Underclassmen as Watcher Elix."

Elix rose to attention.

"Pack your gear, Watcher Elix, you leave for Kyben-Central this afternoon."

Themus noted with fascination that the Watcher's face turned a shade paler.

"M-may I ask why, Superior Furth?" Elix gasped out, maintaining Corps protocol even through his panic.

"Yes, yes, of course," replied Furth in a casual, matter-of-fact manner. "You were on the scene of an orgy in the Hagars Building yesterday during second-shift, were you not?"

Elix swallowed with difficulty and nodded yes, then catching himself he said, "Yes, Superior Furth."

"How much of that orgy did you record?"

"As much as I could before it broke up, sir."

"What you mean is, as much as you could before you found that fondling a young woman named Guzbee was more interesting than your on-duty job. Correct?"

"She—she just *talked* to me for a short time, Superior; I recorded the entire affair. It was—"

"*Out!*" Furth pointed toward the door to the common-room. Elix slumped visibly, turned out of the row, walked up the aisle, and out of the briefing-room.

"And let that be an indication, gentlemen, that we will tolerate no activities with these people, be they Kyben or not. We are here to watch, and there are enough female-Watchers and Central personnel so that any desires that may be aroused in you may be quenched without recourse to our wards. Is that quite clear, gentlemen?"

He did not wait for an answer. They knew it was clear, and he knew it was clear. The message had been transmitted in the most readily understood manner.

"Now to the other business at hand," continued Furth. "We are currently looking for a man named Boolbak, who, we are told, pinches steel. I have no explanation of this description, gentlemen, merely that he 'pinches steel.'

"I can tell you that he has a big, bushy white beard, what they call twinkling eyes, a puffy-cheeked face and a scar across his forehead from temple to temple. He weighs something between 190 and 200 pounds, fat and short, and always dresses in a red jacket and knickers with white fur on them.

"If you see this man, you are to follow him, dictograph him completely—*completely*, do you understand?—and not lose sight of him unless you are relieved by at least ten other Watchers. Is that clear?"

Again he did not wait for an answer, but snapped his fingers casually, indicating the daily briefing was over.

Themus rose with the other thirty-eight Watchers and began to leave the room. There was a uniform look on all their faces; they all had the picture of Elix behind their eyes. Themus began to edge out of his row. He started when Furth called to him.

"Oh, Watcher Themus, I'd like a word with you."

Furth was a strange man, in many ways. He did not fit Themus' picture of a Superior, from previous experience with them, and, still

bewildered by the abrupt fate assigned Elix, he found himself looking on his Superior with a mixture of awe, incredulousness, hatred and fear.

"I hope the—uh—little lesson you saw today will not upset you. It was a harsh measure, to be sure, but it was the only way to get the point across."

Themus knew precisely what the Superior Watcher meant, for he had been taught from youth that this was the way matters should be handled. He also knew what he felt, but he was Kyben, and Kyben know their place.

Furth looked at him for a long moment, then pulled the black sheen that was his cloak closer about him. "I have you slated for big things here, Themus. We will have a post open for a new Junior Watcher in another six to eight months, and your record indicates you're a strong possibility."

Themus was shocked at the familiarity in both conversation protocol and exposition of Corps business, but he kept the astonishment from showing on his face.

"So I want you to keep an eye open here in Valasah," continued Furth. "There are a number of—well—irregularities we want to put a stop to."

"What sort of irregularities, Superior?" The Superior's familiarities had caused a corresponding ease to settle over the Underclassman.

"For one, this fraternization—oh, strictly on an 'occupying troops' level, to be sure, but still a deviation from the norm—and another is that we've had a number of men leave the Corps."

"You mean sent home or—like Watcher Elix?"

The Superior squirmed visibly. "Well, no, not exactly. What I mean is, they've—you might say disappeared."

Themus' eyes opened wider in surprise. "Disappeared? That indicates free choice."

The roles of Superior and Underclassman seemed for the moment to have been transposed, as Furth tried to explain to the new Watcher. "They've just gone. That's all. We can't find any trace of them. We suspect the Crackpots have been up to tricks more annoying than usual."

He suddenly stopped, realizing he had lowered himself by explaining to a lesser, and drew himself erect.

"But then, there's always been a certain percentage of loss here. Unusual, but not too unusual. This *is* a mad world, don't forget."

Themus nodded.

"But then, to compensate, there are a certain number of Crackpots who want to leave their insane people, also. We take off a good three hundred every year; people with the proper Kyben mind, the kind who can snap into a problem and solve it in no time. Good, logical thinkers. The administrative type. You know."

"I see, sir," said Themus, not at all understanding.

He was becoming more and more lost in trying to fathom his Superior.

The elder Watcher seemed to sense a change in the Underclassman's attitude, for once again he became brusque, realizing he had overstepped himself.

"Well, accurate snooping, to you. Good rounds!"

Themus snapped a brisk salute at the Superior and left quickly.

His beat that day was the Seventh Sector, a twelve-block coverage with five fellow Watchers, their rounds overlapping. It was a route from the docks to the minaret-village. From the stock-pens near the Golwal Institute to the pueblo-city.

Valasah, like all cities on Kyba, was a wild melange of disorder. Airy, fragile towers of transparent plastic rose spiraling next to squat quonset-buildings. Teepees hunkered down next to buildings, of multi-dimensional eccentricity, whose arms twisted in on themselves till the eye lost the track of their form.

Streets twisted and suddenly opened onto others. Many stopped dead as though their builders had tired of the effort of continuing. Large empty lots stood next to stores in which customers fought to get at the merchandise.

The people strutted, capered, hobbled, marched and walked backward on both hands and feet through the streets, in the stores, across the tops of a hundred different styles of transportation.

Themus snapped his dicto-box on and spoke, "Record," into it. Then he walked slowly down one street, up the next, into an office building, through doors, past knots of people, dictating anything and everything. Occasionally he would see a fellow Watcher and they would exchange salutes, eyes never leaving their wards.

The Crackpots seemed oblivious to his presence. No conversation would slow or halt at his approach, no one would move from his path, all seemed to accept him somehow.

This bothered Themus.

Why aren't they angry at our eavesdropping? he wondered. *Why do they tolerate us so? Is it fear of the Kyben might? But they are Kyben, too. They call us Stuffed-Shirts, but they are still Kyben. Or were once. What happened to the Kyben might that was born into each of them?*

His thoughts were cut off by sight of an old woman, skin almost yellow-white from age, rapidly wielding a three-pronged pickaxe at the cement of a gutter. He stopped, began dictating, and watched as she broke through the street, pulling out huge gouts of cement-work and dirt from underneath. In a moment she was down on hands and knees, feverishly digging with her gnarled old hands at the dirt.

After thirty-nine minutes, her hands were raw and bleeding, the hole was quite four feet deep, and she kneeled in it, dirt arcing away into the air.

The fifty-minute mark brought her to a halt. She climbed laboriously out of the six-foot hole, grabbed the pickaxe and leaped back in. Themus moved nearer the edge. She was hacking away madly at a sewer pipe some three feet thick.

In a few moments she had driven a gaping hole in the side of the pipe. She reached into her bodice and brought out a piece of what looked like dirty oilcloth, strung with wires.

Themus was astounded to see both clear water and garbage running out of the pipe. Both were running together. No, they *looked* as though they were running together, but the flow of clean water came spurting out in one direction, while the muck and garbage sprayed forth from the opposite direction. They were running in opposite directions in the same pipe!

She clamped the oilcloth onto the pipe, immediately stopping the escape of the water and refuse, and began filling the hole in. Themus watched her till the hole was neatly packed in, only slightly lower than the street level. She had thrown dirt haphazardly in all directions, and some of it was still evident on car tops and in doorways.

His curiosity could be contained no longer.

He walked over to the old woman, who was slapping dirt off her polka-dotted dress, getting spots of blood on it, from her rawed hands. "Excuse me—" he began.

The old woman's face suddenly assumed, "Oh no, here they are again!" as its message in life.

"Garbage runs with the drinking water?" He asked the question tremulously, thinking of all the water he had drunk since his arrival, of the number of deaths from botulism and ptomaine poisoning, of the madness of these people.

The old woman muttered something that sounded like, "Cretinous Stuffed-Shift," and began to pick up a bag of groceries obviously dumped in a hurry before the excavating began.

"Are there many deaths from this?" Themus asked, knowing it was a stupid question, knowing the figures must be staggering, wondering if he would be one of the statistics.

"Hmmph, man, they don't even bother up and back to flow that way in negative polarization of the garboh, let me away from this maniac!" And she stalked off, dirt dropping in small clots from her polka-dotted dress.

He shook his head several times, trying to clear it, but the buzzing of his brains trying to escape through his ears prevented any comfort. He communicated her passage out of his sight through the Communicator-Attachment, received the word she had been picked up by someone else, and started to make his rounds again.

He stopped in mid-stride. It dawned on him suddenly: why hadn't that bit of oilcloth been squirted out of the hole from the pressure in the pipe? What had held it on?

He felt his tongue begin to swell in his mouth, and he realized it had all been deceiving. There had been wires attached to that scrap of oilcloth, they had served some purpose. Undoubtedly that was it. Undoubtedly.

His fine Kyben mind pushed the problem aside.

He walked on, watching, recording. With a sudden headache.

The afternoon netted a continuous running commentary on the ordinary mundane habits of the Crackpots (biting each other on the left earlobe, which seemed to be a common activity; removing tires from landcars and replacing them with wadded-up articles of clothing; munching loaves of the spiral Kyben bread on the streets; poking

long sticks through a many-holed board, to no visible purpose), and several items that Themus considered off-beat even for these warped members of his race:

Item: a young man leaped from the seventeenth story of an office building, plummeted to the third, landed on an awning, and after bouncing six times, lowered himself off the canvas, through the window, into the arms of an attractive blonde girl holding a stenographic pad, who immediately threw the pad away and began kissing him. He did not seem to be hurt by the fall or the abrupt landing. Themus was not sure whether they had been total strangers before the leap, but he did record a break in their amours when his Audio Pickup caught her panting, "What was the name?"

Item: a blind beggar approached him on the street, crying for alms, and when he reached into a pocket to give the fellow a coin, the beggar drew himself taller than Themus had thought he could, and spat directly onto Themus' jump-boots. "Not *that* coin, you clod, not *that* coin. The *other* one." Themus was amazed, for he had but two coins in his pocket and the one intended had been a silver half-kyle and the one the beggar seemed to want was a copper nark. The beggar became indignant at the delay and hurried away, carefully sidestepping a group of men who came hurrying out of an alley.

Item: Themus saw a woman in a televiz booth, rapidly erasing the wall. Viz numbers left there by a hundred occupants suddenly disappeared under the woman's active hands. When she had the walls completely bare she reached into a bag at her feet and brought out a tube of spray-paint.

In a few minutes the booth was repainted a cherry pink, and was completely dry.

Then she began writing new numbers in. After an hour and a quarter, she left, and Themus did too.

Item: a young woman lowered herself by her legs from the sign above a bar-and-grill, swinging directly into Themus' path.

Even upside down she looked good to Themus. She was wearing a pretty print dress and lavender lace-undies. Themus averted his eyes and began to step around her.

"Hello," she said.

Themus stopped and found himself looking up at her, hanging by

her knees from the wooden sign that said, YOU CAN EAT HERE TOO!

She was a beautiful girl, indeed; bright blue hair, a fair golden complexion, high cheekbones, lovely legs, delightful—

He drew himself to attention, turning his eyes slightly away from her, "Watcher Themus at your service, Miss."

"I like you," she said.

"Ummm?" asked Themus, not quite believing he had heard her correctly.

"Do I stutter?"

"Oh—*no*—certainly *not!*"

"Then you heard what I said."

"Well, yes, I suppose I did."

"Then why ask me to repeat it?"

"Because—because—you just *don't* come down that way and tell someone you like them. It isn't—it isn't—well, it isn't—it just isn't *ladylike!*"

She did a double-flip in the air and came down lightly on the balls of her feet, directly in front of the Watcher. "Oh, swizzlegup! It's ladylike if I want to do it. If you can't tell I'm a lady just from looking at me, then I'd better find someone who can tell the difference between the sexes."

Themus found himself quite enthralled. Somehow she was not like the rest of the mad inhabitants of this world. She talked logically—although a bit more forwardly than what he had become accustomed to—and she was certainly delightful to look at. He began to ask her name, when a clear, bright picture of the damned Elix came to him. He turned to leave.

She grabbed him roughly by the sleeve, her fingernails tinkling on his armor.

"Wait a minute, where are you going? I'm not finished talking to you."

"I can't talk to you. The Superior doesn't approve." He nervously ran a hand across the bridge of his nose, while looking up and down the street for brother Watchers.

"Oh, urbbledooz! Him!" She giggled, "He doesn't like anything, that's his job. *If you have a job to do, do it, you understand?*" She

mimicked Furth's voice faithfully, and Themus grinned in spite of himself. She seized on his gesture of pleasure and continued, hurriedly, "I'm nineteen. My name is Darfla. What's yours, Themus?"

"I've got to go. I'll be sent to the Mines. This isn't part of my job. I've got to Watch, don't you under—"

"Oh, all right! If I make it part of your stupid Stuffed-Shirt job will you talk to me?" She drew him into a wide, shadowed doorway with much difficulty.

"Well, I don't know how you can make it a part of my—" He looked about him in apprehension. Could he be court-martialed just for talking? Was he doomed already?

She cut in, "You're looking for a man named Boolbak, aren't you?"

"How did you—"

"Are you are you are you are you are you are you are you are you are?"

"Yes, *yes*, stop that! I don't know how you found out, but yes, we are, why?" Oddly, he found himself slipping into the running-away speech of these people, and it was both pleasing and distressing. He was somehow afraid he might be going native. *But in less than two days?*

"He's my uncle. Would you like to meet him?"

"Record!" Themus barked at his dicto-box.

"Oh, *must* you?" Darfla looked toward the twin suns and crossed her arms in exasperation.

Themus' brow furrowed and he reluctantly muttered, "Off," into the box. "I'm a Watcher, and that's what I'm supposed to do. Watch. But if I don't record it all, then they can't send it to Kyben-Central and there won't be any tapes for me, and I'll get sent to the Mines." He stopped, then added, with a finger stiffly pointed between her eyebrows, "And that may not bother *you*, but I've seen reels of the Mines and crawling through a bore-shaft not much wider than your body dragging an ore-sack tied to your leg, and the chance that sterility won't have time to hit before your face just ups and falls off, well, it sort of makes me worry."

He looked at her, surprised. She was tinkling. Her laughter was actually a tinkle, falling lightly from her and pleasantly tingling his ears. "What are you laughing at?" he frowned, trying to be angry

though her laughter made him feel lighter than he had since he'd hit this madball world.

"Your face *ups* and *falls off!*" She laughed again. "That's the kind of thing you Stuffed-Shirts would expect *me* to say! Beautiful! Yes, I'm sure I like you."

The underclass Watcher was confused. He looked about in confusion, feeling distinctly as though he had come in during the middle of a conversation. "I—I'd better be going. I don't think I want to meet your—"

"All right, all right. Suppose I fix your stupid box so it keeps right on recording; recording things that are happening, in your voice, without your being here, then would you leave it and come with me?"

"Are you out of your mind?" he yelled in a hushed tone.

"Certainly," she said, smiling broadly.

He turned once more to leave, angry and annoyed at her making fun of him. Again she stopped him.

"No, I'm sorry. Please, I can do it. Honestly. Here, let me have it."

"Look, I *can't* give you my dicto-box. That's about the most terrible thing a Watcher can do. I'd be—I'd be—they'd hang me, shoot me, starve me, kill me, then send the ashes of my cremated stump to our Mines to be used for feeding the slave-apes. Leave me alone!" The last was a rising note, for the girl had lifted her skirt and drawn a curved knife from her garter-belt and was determinedly prying off the top of the dicto-box, still attached to Themus' chest.

The Watcher fought down a mad impulse to ask her why she was wearing a garter-belt when she wasn't wearing hose, and tried to stop her.

"Wait! Wait! They'll throw me out of the Corps. Stop! Here, let go there, wait a minute, I say waitàminute-forgod' sake, if you won't stop, at least let me take it off so you don't slice my throat. Here."

He slipped the shoulder-straps off and unbuckled the belt. The dicto-box fell into the girl's hand and she set to work fumbling about in the machine's intricate innards.

Finally she stood up, her feet lost in a pile of wirespools, vacuum tubes, metal separators, punch-circuits and plastic coils. The box looked empty inside, except for a strangely flotsam-like construction in one corner.

"Look what you've done now!"

"Stop whining, man! It's all right."

"If it's all right, make it record and play back for me." He was terrified, indignant, furious and interested, all at once.

"I can't."

"*Whaaaaaaat!*"

"Why should I? I'm crazy, remember?"

Themus felt his face turn to lava. "Damn you! Look what you've done to me! In five minutes you've taken me from my Corps and sentenced me to a life that may be no longer than all the brains you have, stretched end to end!"

"Oh, stop being so melodramatic." She was smiling, tinkling again. "Now you can come with me to meet my uncle. There's no reason why you should stay here. There is a chance the box will play, if you come back to it later, as I said it would. But even if it doesn't, staying here is no help, since it isn't functioning. I'll get a mechanic to fix it, if that will make you any happier."

"No Crackpot mechanic can fix that, you fool! It's a masterpiece of Kyben science. It took hundreds of men thousands of hours to arrive at this— Oh, what's the use!" He sat down in the doorway, head in his hands.

Somehow, her logic was sound. If the box was broken, there was no reason for his refusing to go with her, for staying there could only bring him trouble sooner. It was sound, yes, but only sound on the muggy foundation of her ruining the machine in the first place. He was beginning to feel like a *tompora*-snake—the kind that swallows its own tail. He didn't know which end was which.

"Come with me." Her voice had suddenly lost its youthful happiness. It was suddenly strong, commanding. He looked up.

"Get on your feet!"

He arose slowly.

"Now, come with me. If you want to come back to your box, it will be here, and it will work. Right now it will do as well if you believe I'm mad and ruined your dicto-box." She jerked her head sharply toward the street. "Come on. Perhaps you can reinstate yourself by finding the man named Boolbak."

It was hopeless there among the remnants of the dicto-box. There was a chance the girl wasn't as totally insane as she seemed and she

actually might be Boolbak's niece. And, somehow, against all his better, stricter, reasoning to the contrary, her logic was queerly sound. In a fugitive sort of way.

He went with her.

(Wondering if he was insane, himself.)

Themus followed the girl through sections of the city Superior Furth had missed during his guided tour of inspection. They passed under a beautifully filigreed arch into a gardened street lined with monstrous blossoms growing to heights of eight and nine feet on either side of the road, casting twin shadows from the bright suns above.

Once he stopped her, in the shadows of a towering flower, and asked, "Why did you decide you wanted me to meet your uncle?"

"I've been watching you all day," she said simply, as if prepared to leave that as a total explanation.

"But why me?"

"I like you," she said, as though being purposely repetitious to impress him. Themus distinctly got the idea she was treating him as she would a very young child.

"Oh. I see," he said, more baffled than before. They continued down the street through an area covered by long, low structures that might have been factories were it not for the impossibly tall and spindly looking towers that reared from the roof of each one. Themus shaded his eyes from the glare of the twin suns as he sought to glimpse what was at the top of each tower. He could see nothing.

"What are those?" he asked. He was surprised to hear his own voice. It sounded like that of an inquisitive little boy.

"Quiet, you."

That was the last thing Darfla said till they came out of nowhere and grabbed her and Themus.

Before the Watcher knew what was happening, a horde, more men than he could count, had surrounded them. They were dressed in everything from loincloth and top hat to burnoose and riding boots. Darfla gave one sharp, tiny squeal and then let her hands fall limply to her sides.

"All right, you want your say, so say!" Anger and annoyance fluttered in her voice.

A short, pock-faced man wearing a suit that appeared to be made

from ropes of different colors stepped forward.

"We thought negative (click-click!) and wanted to talk on this at Cave (click-click!)." Themus listened with growing amazement. Not only did the man intersperse every few words with a metallic, unnerving tongue-clacking, but he said the word "Cave" with a low, mysterious, important tone totally unlike the rest of his speech which was quite flat and uninflected.

Darfla raised her hands, palms upward, in resignation. "What can I say, Deere, after I say I'm sorry?"

The man addressed as Deere shook his head and said, "(Click-click!) we before talked and him not now *never never never!* Nothing to say against the (Click!) but he's def but def a stuffed one at least well now for a time (Click!). Cave." Same clucking, same cryptic tone when speaking of the Cave. Themus began to worry in direct proporation to the number of surrounders.

"Let's go," Darfla said over her shoulder to Themus, not taking her eyes from Deere.

"W-where?" trembled Themus.

"Cave. Where else?"

"Oh, nowhere—I guess." He tried to be lighthearted about it. Somehow, he failed miserably.

They started off, the surrounders doing a masterful job of surrounding; cutting Themus and the girl off from anyone who might be looking. They were a walking camouflage.

Darfla began to needle Deere with caustic, and to Themus, cryptic remarks. Deere looked about to turn and put his pudgy fist in her face, and Themus nudged the girl to stop.

"Woof woof a goldfish," she tossed off as a final insult.

"(Click!)" answered Deere, sticking his tongue out.

It was a huge, featureless block in the midst of completely empty ground. Something about it suggested that it was an edifice of total disinterest. Themus recalled buildings he had seen in his youth that had been vaguely like this one. Buildings he would make a point of not bothering to enter, so uninteresting were they.

Inside it was a cave.

Stalactites hung down from the ceiling in wedge-shaped rockiness. Stalagmites pushed their way up from the floor, spiking the stone

underfoot. A mud collar surrounded a small pool in which clear water rippled. The walls were hewn out of rock, the floor was sand-covered stone.

They could have been five miles underground. It was another world.

It was crammed with Crackpots.

Themus walked between two huge men wearing fezzes and sword-belts, behind the clicking Deere and next to Darfla who looked uneasy. Themus felt more than merely uneasy. He was terrified.

"Deere!"

It was Darfla. She had stopped, was being pushed unwillingly by the weight of people moving behind her. "I want this talked out right now. Here. Now. Here. Now. Here. Now—"

"Don't (Click!) try that here, Darfla. We have ours, too, you know (Click-click!)."

"All right. Straight, then."

"Were you taking him to see Boolbak?"

"Yes, why?"

"You know your uncle isn't reliable. He could say anything, Darfla. We have no fear, really, but why tempt the Chances." He pursed his pudgy lips and said, "We'll have to recondition your Watcher, girl. I'm sorry." There was a murmur from the large, restless crowd.

Themus did not know what reconditioning was, nor what the whole conversation had been about, nor who these people were, but he recognized the Watcher part, and the fact that something unpleasant was about to happen to him.

He looked around for a way out, but there was none. He was effectively manacled by the sheer weight of numbers. The Cave was filled, and the walls were lined with people. All they had to do was move in and he'd be squashed.

He remained very still, turned his inward eyes upward and ran painstakingly over the list of his family Lords, offering up to each of them paeans of praise and pleas for help and deliverance.

"No, no!" Darfla was pleading, "He's not really. He's a Kyben. I wouldn't have been able to stand him, would I, if he were a real Stuff?"

Deere bit the inside of his cheek in thought. "We thought so, too,

when we got the list, but since he's been here, it's been too early to tell, and now you've let him too close to it all. We don't like this, Darfla, but—"

"Test him. He'll show you." She was suddenly close to Deere, his hand in hers, her face turned down to the fat little man's pudgy stare. "Please, Deere. For what uncle used to be."

Deere exhaled fully, pursed his lips again and said, "All right, Darfla. If the others say it's all right. It's not my decision to make."

He looked around. There was a mutter of assent from the throng. Deere turned to Themus, looking at the Watcher appraisingly.

Then suddenly—

"Here it is: we're mad. You must prove to us *you* are mad. You must do—oh, let's see—five mad acts. Truly mad. Right here in the Cave. You can do anything but harm one of us or try to escape. And we're mad, so we'll know if they're mad acts or not. Now, go on."

"Tell him the rest, Deere, tell him—" Darfla began.

"Quiet, woman! That's all there is, Watcher. Go on." He stood back, arms folded across his round little belly.

"Mad? What kind of madness? I mean, like what? I don't . . . I can't do any . . ." Themus looked at Darfla. Something unhinged within him at sight of her, about to cry.

He thought for a while. The crowd became impatient, voices called out things from the pack. He thought longer. Then his face smiled all the way from his mouth to his hairline.

Calmly he walked over to Darfla and began undressing her.

The clack of jaws falling was an audible thing in the sudden silence of the Cave.

Themus stripped her piece by piece, carefully knotting and pulling each piece of clothing before he went on to the next. Blouse. Knot and pull tight. Belt. Knot and pull tight. Skirt. Knot and pull tight.

Darfla offered no resistance, but her face went stoney and her jaw muscles worked rhythmically.

Eventually she was naked to the skin.

Themus bent down, made sure each item of clothing was securely knotted. Then he gathered it all up in a bundle and brought the armful to the girl. She put out her arms and he dropped the bundle into them.

"Knots to you," he said.

"One," said Deere.

Themus could feel small generators in his head begin to spin, whirr and grind as they worked themselves up to a monstrous headache.

He stood spraddle-legged in the open area among the Crackpots, a tall, blue-haired man with a nose just a trifle too long and cheeks just a trifle too sunken, and rubbed his a-trifle-too-long nose in deep concentration.

Again he smiled.

Then he spun three times on his toes, badly, and made a wild dash for one of the onlookers.

The Crackpot looked around in alarm, saw his neighbors smiling at his discomfort, and looked back at Themus, who had stopped directly in front of him.

The Crackpot wore a shirt and slacks of motley, a flat mortar-board-type hat askew over his forehead. The mortar-board slipped a fraction of an inch as he looked at Themus.

The Watcher stood before him, intently staring at his own hand. Themus was clutching his left elbow with his right hand. His left hand was extended, the fingers bent up like spikes, to form a rough sort of enclosure.

"See my guggle-fish?" asked Themus.

The Crackpot opened his mouth once; strangled a bit, closed his mouth, strangled a bit, opened his mouth again. Nothing came out.

Themus extended his hand directly under the other's nose. It was obviously a bowl he was holding in his hand. "See my guggle-fish?" he repeated.

Confused, the Crackpot managed to say, "W-*what* g-guggle-fish? I don't see any fish."

"That isn't odd," said Themus, grinning, "they all died last week."

Over the roar of the crowd the voice of a blocky-faced man next to the motley-wearer rose:

"I see your guggle-fish. Right there in the bowl. *I* see them. Now what?"

"You're crazier than I am," said Themus, letting the mythical bowl evaporate as he opened his hand, "I don't have any bowl."

"Two," said Deere, his brow furrowed.

Without wasting a moment, Themus began shoving the Crackpots toward the wall. Without resistance they allowed themselves to be pushed a bit. Then they stopped.

"For this one I'll need everyone's help," said Themus. "Everybody has to line up. I need everyone in a straight line, a real straight line." He began shoving again. This time they all allowed themselves to be pushed into a semblance of order, a line straight across the Cave.

"No, no," muttered Themus slowly, "that isn't quite good enough. Here." He went to one end, began moving each Crackpot a bit forward or backward till they were all approximately in the same positions of the line.

He went to the right end and squinted down the line.

"You there, fourth from the end, move back a half-step, will you. Uh, yes, that's—just—*stop!* Fine. Now you," he pointed to a fellow with yellow bagged-out trousers and no shirt, "move up just a smidgee-un-uh-nuh! *Stop!* That's just perfect."

He stepped back away from them and looked along both ways, surveying them as a general surveys his troops.

"You're all nicely in line. All the same. The Crackpots are neatly maneuvered into being regimented Stuffed-Shirts. Thank you," he said, grinning widely.

"Three," said Deere, blushing and furrowed at the same time.

Themus was pacing back and forth by the time the crowd had hurriedly and self-consciously gotten itself out of rank and clumped around the Cave again.

He paced from one huge stalagmite, kicking it on turning, to the edge of the mud-surrounded pool and began scrabbling in the mud at his feet.

He scooped up two huge handfuls of the runny stuff and carried it a few feet away to a rock surface. Plunking it down he hurried back for another handful. This he carried with wild abandon, spraying those near him with drops of the gunk, till he was back where he had deposited the previous load. Then he stopped, considered for a long moment, then placed the mud gingerly atop the other, at an angle.

Then he hurried back for more.

This he again placed with careful deliberation, tongue poking from a corner of his mouth, eyes narrowed in contemplation.

Then another load.

And another.

Each one placed with more care than the last, till he had a huge structure over four feet tall.

He stepped back from it, looked at it, raised his thumb and squinted at it through one eye. Then he raced back to the deep hole that had been gouged out of the mud and took a fingerful of the stuff.

He ran back, patted it carefully into place, smoothed it with an experienced hand, and stepped back, with a sigh and a look of utter contentment and achievement.

"Ah! Just the way I wanted it," he said. . .

. . .and jumped into the hole.

"Four," said Deere, tears of laughter streaming down his cheeks.

Themus sat in the hole, legs drawn up and crossed, hands cupping his chin, elbows on knees. He sat.

And sat longer.

And still sat.

And remained seated.

Deere walked over to him and looked down. "What is the fifth act of madness?"

"There isn't any."

More quickly than anyone could follow, he had swivelled back and his head had revolved on his head in a blur, "*There isn't any?*"

"I'm going to sit here and not do any more."

The crowd murmured again. "What?" cried Deere. "What do you mean, you won't do any more? We set you five. You've done four. Why no fifth?"

"Because if I don't do a fifth, you'll kill me, and I think that's mad enough even for you."

Though Deere's back was turned and he was walking away, Themus was certain he heard, "Five," from somewhere.

"They want you to come back here again after you've seen my uncle," said Darfla, a definite chill in her voice.

They were walking briskly down a moving traverseway, the girl a few steps ahead of the Watcher.

Themus knew he had a small problem on his hands.

"Look, Darfla, I'm sorry about that back there, but it was my life or a little embarrassment for you. It was the first thing I could bring to

mind, and I had to stall for time. I'm *really* sorry, but I'm sure they've seen a woman naked before, and you must have been naked before a man before so it shouldn't—"

Themus fell silent. The continued down the traverseway, Darfla striding forward, anger evident in each long step.

Finally the girl came to an intersection of belt-strips and agilely swung across till she was on the slowest moving outer belt. She stepped off, took several rapid steps to lose momentum, and turned to Themus.

"We'd better stop in here for a moment and get you something to wear over that Watcher uniform. It isn't hard to avoid the Stuffed-Shirts," she said, looking at him with disparagement, "but there's no sense taking foolish chances."

She indicated a small shop that was all window and no door, with a hastily painted message across one of the panes. ELGIS THE COSTUMER and IF WE DON'T GOT IT, IT AIN'T WORTH HAVING! They entered through a cleverly designed window that spun on a center-pin.

Inside the shop Darfla spoke briefly to a tall, thin Crackpot in black half-mask and body-tight black suit. He disappeared down a shaft in the floor from which stuck a shining pole.

The girl pulled a bolt of cloth off a corner of the counter and perched herself, with trim legs crossed. Themus stood looking at the shop.

It was a costumer's all right, and with an arrangement and selection of fantastic capacities. Clothing ranged from rustic Kyben farmgarb to the latest spun plastene fibers from all over the Galaxy. He was marveling at the endless varieties of clothing when the tall, thin Crackpot slid back up the pole.

He stepped off onto the floor, much to Themus' amazement, and no elevator-disc followed him. It appeared that the man had come up the pole the same way he had gone down, without mechanical assistance. Themus was long past worrying over such apparent inconsistencies. He shrugged and looked at the suit the fellow had brought up with him.

Ten minutes later he looked at the suit on himself, in a full-length mirror-cube, and smiled at his sudden change from Underclass

Watcher Themus to a sheeted and fetish-festooned member of the Toad-Revelers cult found on Fewb-huh IV.

His earrings hung in shining loops to his shoulders, and the bag of toad-shavings on his belt felt heavier than he thought it should. He pulled the drawstring on the bag and gasped. They *were* toad-shavings. He tucked the bottom folds of the multi-colored sheet into his boot-tops, swung the lantern onto his back, and looked at Darfla in expectation.

He caught her grinning, and when he, too, smiled, her face went back to its recent stoniness.

Darfla made some kind of arrangement with Elgis, shook his hand, bit his ear, said, "How are the twins, Elgis?" to which the costumer replied, "Eh!" in a lackadaisical tone, and they left.

The rest of the trip through the patchwork-quilt of Valasah was spent in silence.

The Crackpots were not what they seemed. Of that Themus was certain. He had been very stupid not to notice it before, and he thought the Watchers must be even more stupid for not having seen it in all their hundreds of years on Kyba.

But there was a factor he did not possess. Garbage and water that ran in different directions through the same pipe, a beggar that knew how many coins he had in his pocket, a girl who could rip out the innards of a dicto-box, leaving it so it would work—and somehow he was now certain it *would* work—without a human behind it, and a full-sized cave built inside a concrete block. These were not the achievements of madmen.

But they *were* mad!

They had to be. All the things which seemed mysterious and superhuman were offset by a million acts of out-and-out insanity. They lived in a world of no standardization, no conformity at all. There was no way to gauge the way these people would act, as you could with the Kyben of the stars. It was—it was—well, *insane!*

Themus' nose itched in confusion, but he refrained from unseemly scratching.

"Don't I look like Santa Claus?" he said.

"Who?" asked Themus, looking at the roly-poly florid face and

bushy beard. He tried to ignore the jaggedly yellow scar that reached from temple to temple.

"Santa Claus, Santa Claus, you lout? Haven't you ever heard of the Earthmen's mythical hero, Santa Claus? He was the hero of the Battle of the Alamo, he discovered what they call The Great Pyramid of Gizeh, he was the greatest drinker of milk out of wooden shoes that planet ever knew!"

"What's milk?" asked Themus.

"Lords, what a clod!" He screwed up his lips in a childish pout. "I did immense research work on the subject. Immense!" Then he muttered, under his breath, almost an afterthought, "Immense."

The old man was frightened. It showed, even through the joviality of his garb and appearance.

Themus could not understand the old man. He looked as though he would be quite the maddest of the lot, but he talked in a soft, almost whispering voice, lucidly, and for the most part of familiar things. Yet there was something about him which set him apart from the other Crackpots. He did not have the wild-eyed look.

No one was saying anything and the sounds of their breathing in the basement hide-out was loud in Themus' ears. "Are you Boolbak, the steel-pincher?" the Watcher asked, to make conversation. It seemed like the thing to say.

The bearded oldster shifted his position on the coal pile on which he was sitting, blackening his beard, covering his red suit with dust. His voice changed from a whisper to a shrill. "A spy! A spy! They've come after me. You'll do it to me! You'll bend it! Get away from me, get away from me, gedda way from me, geddawayfromee!" The old man was peering out from over the top of the pile, pointing a shaking finger at Themus.

"Uncle Boolbak!" Darfla's brows drew down and she clapped her hands together. The old man stopped shouting and looked at her.

"What?" he asked, pouting childishly.

"He's no spy, whatever he is," she said, casting a definitely contemptuous glance at Themus. "He was a Watcher alerted to find you. I liked him," she said looking toward the ceiling to find salvation for such a foul deed, "and I thought that it was about time you stopped this nonsense of yours and spoke to one of them. So I brought him here."

"Nonsense? Nonsense, is it! Well, you've sealed my doom, girl! Now they'll bend it around your poor uncle's head as sure as Koobis and Poorah rise every morning. Oh, what have you done?"

The girl shook her head sadly, "Oh, stop it, will you. No one wants to hurt you. Show him your steel-pinching."

"No!" he answered, pouting again.

Themus watched in amazement. The man was senile. He was a tottering, doddering child. Of what possible use could he be? Of what possible *interest* could he be to both the Watchers and the Crackpots, who had tried to stop Darfla's bringing him here?

Suddenly the old man smiled secretly and moved in closer, sidling up to the Watcher as though he had a treasure everyone was after. He made small motions with his pudgy fingers, indicating he wanted Themus' attention, his patience, his silence, and his ear, in that order. It was a most eloquent motioning, and Themus found he was complying, though no vocal request had been made. He bent closer.

Uncle Boolbak dug into a pocket of the red coal-coated jacket, and fished out a cane-shaped, striped piece of candy. "Want a piece of candy? Huh, want it, huh?"

Themus felt an urge to bolt and run, but he summoned all his dignity and said, "I'm Themus, Underclass Watcher, and I was told you—pitch steel. Is that right?"

For a moment the old man looked unhappy that the Watcher did not want any candy, then suddenly his face hardened. The eyes lost their twinkle and looked like two cold diamonds blazing at him. Boolbak's voice, too, became harder, more mature, actually older. "Yes, that's right, I 'pinch' steel, as you put it. You wonder what that means, eh?"

Themus found himself unable to talk. The man's whole demeanor had changed. The Watcher suddenly felt like a child before a great intellect. He could only nod.

"Here. Let me show you." The old man went behind the furnace and brought out two plates of steel. From a workbench along one wall he took a metal punch and double-headed hammer. He threw down one of the plates, and handed Themus the punch and hammer.

"Put a hole in this with that punch," he said, motioning Themus toward the other plate, which he had laid flat on the workbench.

Themus hesitated. "Come, come, boy. Don't dawdle."

The Watcher stepped to the workbench, set the punch on the plate and tapped lightly till he had a hole started. Then he placed the punch in it again and brought the hammer down on its head with two swift strokes. The clangs rang loud in the dim basement. The punch sank through the plate and went a quarter-inch into the table. "I didn't hit it very hard," Themus explained, looking over his shoulder at "Santa Claus."

"That's all right. It's very soft steel. Too many impurities. Kyben spacecraft are made of a steel which isn't too much better than this, though they back it with strong reinforcers. Now watch."

He took the plate in his hand, holding it between thumb and forefinger at one corner, letting it hang down. With the other hand he pinched it at the opposite corner, pressing thumb and forefinger together tightly.

The plate crumbled to dust, drifting down over the old man's pinching hand in a bright stream.

Themus' mouth opened of its own accord, his chest tightened. Such a thing wasn't possible. The old man was a magician.

The dust glowed up at him from the floor. It was slightly luminous. He goggled, unable to help himself.

"Now," said Boolbak, taking the other plate. "Put a hole in this one."

Themus found he was unable to lift the hammer. His hands refused to obey. One did not see such things and remain untouched.

"Snap out of it, boy! Come on, punch!" The old man's voice was commanding; Themus broke his trance.

He placed the punch on the second plate and in three heavy blows had gone through it and into the table again.

"Fine, fine," said Uncle Boolbak, holding the second plate as he had the first. He pinched it, with a slight revolving movement of the fingers.

The steel seemed to change. It stayed rigid in shape, but the planes of it darkened, ran together. It was a flat piece of metal, but suddenly it seemed to have depths, other surfaces.

Boolbak held it out to Themus, "Put another hole in it."

Themus took it, wonderingly, and laid it down on the workbench. It seemed heavier than before. He brougth the hammer down sharply, three times.

The metal was unmarred.

He set the punch and hammered again, harder, half a dozen times. He took the punch away. Its point was dulled, the punch shank was slightly bowed. The metal was unscarred.

"It's—it's—" he began, his tongue abruptly becoming a wad of cotton batting in his mouth.

Boolbak nodded, "It's changed, yes. It is now harder than any steel ever made. It can withstand heat or cold that would either melt to paste or shatter to splinters any other metal. It is impregnable. It is the ideal war-metal. With it an army is invincible. It is the closest thing to an ultimate weapon ever devised, for it is unstoppable.

"A tank composed of this metal would be a fearsome juggernaut. A spaceship of it could pierce the corona of a sun. A soldier wearing body armor of it would be a superman." He stood back, his lips a thin line, letting Themus look dumfoundedly at the plate he held.

"But how do you—how can you—it's impossible! How can you make this? What have you done to it?" Themus felt the room swirl around him, but that defied the laws of the universe.

"Sit down. I want to talk to you. I want to tell you some things." He put one arm around Themus' shoulders, leading him to a flight of stairs, to sit down.

Themus looked at Darfla. She was biting her lip. Was this the talk the Crackpots did not want him to have with Uncle Boolbak?

Themus sensed: this is it. This is an answer. Perhaps not *the* answer to all that troubled him, but it was, unquestionably, *an* answer.

Suddenly he didn't want to know. He was afraid; terribly afraid. He stammered. "Do-do you think you should? I'm a Watcher, you know, and I don't want to—"

The old man cut him off with a wave of his hand, and pushed him down firmly.

"You think you're watching us, don't you?" began Boolbak. "I mean, you think the Watcher Corps was assigned here to keep an eye on all the loonies, don't you? To keep the black sheep in the asylum so the star-flung Kyben don't lose face or esteem in the Galaxy, isn't that it?"

Themus nodded, reluctantly, not wanting to insult the old man.

Boolbak laughed. "Fool! We *want* you here. Do you think for a

moment we'd allow you blundering pompous snoopers around if we didn't have a use for you?

"Let me tell you a story," the old man went on. "Hundreds of years ago, before what you blissfully call the Kyben Explosion into space, both Crackpots and Stuffed-Shirts lived here, though they weren't divided that way, back then. The Stuffed-Shirts were the administrators, the implements of keeping everything neatly filed, and everyone in line. That type seems to gravitate toward positions of influence and power.

"The Crackpots were the nonconformists. They were the ones who kept coming up with the new ideas. They were the ones who painted the great works of art. They were the ones who composed the most memorable music. They were the ones who overflowed the lunatic asylums. They thought up the great ideas, true, but they were a thorn in the side of the Stuffs, because they couldn't be predicted. They kept running off in all directions at once. They were a regimental problem. So the Stuffs tried to keep them in line, gave them tedious little chores to do, compartmentalized them in thought, in habits, in attitudes. The noncons snapped. There is no record of it, but there was almost a war on this planet that would have wiped out every Kyben—of both breeds—to the last man."

He rubbed a hand across his eyes, as if to wipe away unpleasant images.

Themus and Darfla listened, intently, their eyes fastened to those of the old man in his ridiculous costume. Themus knew Darfla must have heard the story before, but still she strained to catch every sound Boolbak made.

"Luckily, the cooler heads won. An alternate solution was presented, and carried out. You've always thought the Kyben left their misfits, the Crackpots, behind. That we were left here because we weren't good enough, that we would disgrace our hard-headed pioneers before the other races, isn't that the story you've always heard? That we are the black sheep of the Kyben?"

He laughed, shaking his head.

"Fools! We threw you out! We didn't want you tripping all over our heels, annoying us. We weren't left behind—*you* were thrown away!"

Themus's breath caught in his throat. It was true. He knew it was

true. He had no doubts. It was so. In the short space of a few seconds the whole structure of his life had been inverted. He was no longer a member of the elite corps of the elite race of the universe; he was a clod, an unwanted superfluousity, a tin soldier, a carbon copy.

He started to say something, but Boolbak cut him off. "We have nothing against ruling the Galaxy. We like the idea, in fact. Makes things nice when we want something unusual and it takes influence to get it quickly. But why should we bother doing the work when we can pull a string or two and one of you armor-plated puppets will perform the menial tasks.

"Certainly we allow you to rule the Galaxy. It keeps you out of trouble, and out of our hair. You rule the Galaxy, but *we* rule *you!*"

Thunder rolled endlessly through the Watcher's head. He was being bombarded with lightning, and he was certain any moment he would rip apart. It was too much, all too suddenly.

Boolbak was still talking: "We keep the Watcher Corps on other worlds both for spying purposes and as a cover-up. So we can have a Watcher Corps here on Kyba without attracting any attention to ourselves. A few hundred of you aren't that much bother, and it's ridiculously easy to avoid you when we wish to. Better than a whole planet of you insufferable bores."

He stopped again, and pointed a pudgy finger at Themus' chest armor.

"We established the Watcher Corps as a liaison between us, when we had innovations, new methods, concepts ready for use, and you, with your graspy little hands always ready to accept what the 'lunatics back home' had come up with.

"Usually the ideas were put into practice and you never knew they originated here.

"We made sure the Watchers' basic motto was to watch, watch, watch, whatever we did, to save ourselves the trouble of getting the information back where it would do the most good, undistorted—and believe me, if we didn't want you to see something, it wasn't hard to hide it from you; you're really quite simple and stupid animals—so when we had a new invention or concept, all we had to do was walk into a public square and demonstrate it for you. *Pegulla,* see—*pegulla,* do."

Themus mused aloud, interrupting the old man, "But what does,

well, stacking *juba*-fruits in the square demonstrate?"

"We wouldn't expect your simple-celled minds to grasp something like that immediately," answered Boolbak. "But I happen to know Shella, who did that, and I know what he was demonstrating. He was illustrating a new system of library filing, twice as efficient as the old one.

"He knew it would be dictated, sent back to Kyben-Central and finally understood for what it was. We give you enough clues. If something seems strange, think about it a while, and a logical use and explanation will appear. Unfortunately, that is the one faculty the Star-Flung Kyben are incapable of using. Their minds are patterned, their thoughts set in tracks." The laugh was a barb this time.

"But why are you all so—so—*mad?*" Themus asked, a quavering note in his voice.

"Beginning to crack, boy? I'll tell you why we're *mad*, as you put it. We're not mad, we're just doing what we want, when we want, the way we want. You rigid-thinkers can't recognize the healthy sanity of that. You think everyone has to wear a standardized set of clothes, go to his dentist a specified number of times, worship in delineated forms, marry a specified type of mate. In other words, live his life in a mold.

"The only way to stimulate true creativeness is to allow it to grow unchained with restrictions. We're not mad at all. We may put on a bit, just to cover from you boobs, but we're saner than you. Can you change the molecular structure of a piece of steel, just by touching it at a juncture of atom-chains?"

"Is that—that—how you did it?" Themus asked.

"Yes. How far could I have gotten on a thing of this kind if I'd grown up in a culture like the one you've always known?

"For every mad thing you see on this world, there is a logical, sane answer."

Themus felt his knees shaking. This was all too much to be taken at one sitting. The very fiber of his universe was being unwound and split down the grain.

He looked at Darfla for the first time in what seemed an eternity, and found it impossible to tell what she was thinking.

"Buy why haven't you shown this steel-pinching to the Watchers, if

you want them to know all the new concepts?" the incredulous Themus questioned.

Boolbak's face suddenly went slack. The eyes became glassy and twinkly again. His face became flushed. He clapped his hands together childishly. "Oh, no! I don't want that!"

"But why?" demanded Themus.

Again the old man's face changed. This time abject terror shone out. He began to sweat. "They're gonna chase me, and bend a bar of iron around my head."

He leaped up and ran in a flurry back to the coal pile, where he burrowed into the black dust and peered out, trembling.

"But that's crazy! No one wants to bend a bar of iron around your head. Only a maniac would keep a secret like that because of a crazy reason like that!"

"Exactly," came Darfla's voice from behind him, sadly, "that's just it. Uncle *is* crazy."

They had wanted to see Themus after his talk with Uncle Boolbak, and though Darfla had taken pains to cover their tracks, a group of Crackpots were waiting outside the house when they emerged.

Themus was white and shaking, and made no movement of resistance as they were hustled into a low-slung bubble-roadster and whisked back to the Cave.

"Well, did he talk to that mad genius?" asked Deere.

Darfla nodded sullenly. "Just as you said. He knows."

Deere turned to Themus. "Not quite all however, Do you think you can take more, Watcher?"

Themus felt distinctly faint. One microscopic bit more added to the staggering burden of revelation he had had tossed on him, and he was prepared to sink through the floor.

However, Deere was not waiting for an answer. He motioned to a man in a toga and spiked belt, who came toward Themus. "See this man?" Deere asked.

Themus said yes. Deere tapped the man lightly on the chest, "Senior Watcher, First Grade, Norsim, lately disappeared from the barracks at Kyba-Base, Valasah." He pointed to three others standing together near the front of the crowd. "Those three were top men in

the Corps, over a period of ten years. Now they're Crackpots."

Themus' eyebrows and hands asked, "But how?"

"There is a gravitating factor among Kyben," he explained. "There are Crackpots who are brought up as Stuffs who realize when they get here that their thinking has been fettered. Eventually they come to us. They come to us for the simple reason that the intellect rises through the Watcher ranks, and for several reasons gets assigned here. We've made sure the smartest boys get final assignment here.

"On the other side of the ledger there are non-cons who go psycho from the responsibility of being a freethinker when they want supervision, and their thinking directed. They eventually wind up as Kyben, after minor reconditioning so they don't remember all this," he waved his hand to indicate the Cave. "Now they're somewhere out there and probably quite happy."

"But how can you make a Watcher disappear so completely, when the whole garrison here is looking—"

"Simple," said a voice from behind Themus.

Supervisor Furth just stood smiling.

Themus just stood choking.

The elder Watcher grinned at the confusion swirling about Themus' face.

"How did—when were you—" Themus stuttered.

Furth raised a hand to stop him. "I was an unbending Stuff for a good many years, Themus, before I realized the Crackpot in me wanted out." He grinned widely. "Do you know what did it? I was kidnapped, put in a barrel with a bunch of chattering *pegullas*, and forced to think my way out. I finally made it, and when I crawled out, all covered with *pegulla*-dung, those grinning maniacs helped me up and said, 'More fun than a barrel of *pegullas!*' "

Themus began to chuckle.

"That did it," said Furth.

"But why do you send men like Elix back to the Mines? You must know how horrible it is. That isn't at all consistent."

Furth's mouth drew down at the corner, "It is, when you consider that I'm supposed to be the iron hand of the Watcher garrison here on Kyba. We have to keep the Stuffs in line. They have to be maneuvered, while they think they're maneuvering us. And Elix was getting too far out of line."

"Do you know how close to being killed you came when we brought you here the first time?" Deere said.

Themus turned back to the pock-faced little man, "No. I—I—thought you'd just send me back and let the Corps deal with me."

"Hardly. We aren't afraid of our blundering brothers with the armored hides, but we certainly don't take wide chances to attract attention to ourselves. We like our freedom too much for that.

"You see, we aren't play-acting at being odd. We actually enjoy and live the job of being individuals. But there is a logic to our madness. Nothing we do is folly."

"But," Themus objected, "what are the explanations for things like—" and he finger-listed several things that had been bothering him.

"The garbage is negatively polarized, so it touches nothing but its side of the sewer pipes," explained Furth. "The beggar, who by the way is a professional numismatist, can sense the 'structural aura' of various metals, that's how he knew how many and what type coins you had in your pocket. The Cave here is merely an adequate job of force-moving large areas of soil and rock, and atomic realignment . . ."

He explained for a few more minutes, Themus' astonishment becoming deeper and deeper at each further revelation of what he had considered superhuman achievements. Finally, the young Watcher asked, "But why haven't these discoveries been turned over to Kyben-Central?"

"There are some things our little categorizing brothers aren't ready for, as yet," explained Deere. "Even you were not ready. Chance saved you, you know."

Themus looked startled. "Chance?"

"Well, chance, and your innate intelligence, boy. We had to see if there was enough non-con in you to allow you to live. The re-conditioning in your case would have been—ah—something of a failure. The five mad acts you were to perform not only had to be mad—they had to be *logically* mad. They each had to illustrate a point."

"Wait a minute," said Themus. "I had no idea what I was going to do. I just did it, that's all."

"Um-hm. Quite right, but if *you* didn't know, at least your

subconscious was able to put two and two together and come up with the proper four. The acts you did demonstrated you had courage enough to be a non-con, that you were smart enough to maneuver us Crackpots—so it would be easy enough for you to help us maneuver the Stuffs—that you could be a non-con thinker when you had to be, and even you knew you were too valuable to kill.

"Even if *you* weren't in on it, your subconscious and the rest of *us* were."

"But—but—what I don't get is, why did you try to stop me from seeing Boolbak and then let me go, and why does Boolbak hide from you and the Watchers both?"

"One at a time," replied Deere. "Boolbak hides because he *is* mad. There are some like that in every group. He happens to be a genius, but he's also a total madman. We don't try to keep tabs on him, because we already have the inventions he's come up with, but we don't put him out of the way because he might get something new one of these days we *don't* have, and then too, he was a great man once, long before—" He stopped suddenly, realizing he had stepped over the line from explanation to maudlinity. "We're not barbarians. Nor are we a secret underground movement. We don't want to overthrow anything, we just want to do as we please. If our brothers feel like foaming up and ruling star-systems, all well and good, it makes it easier for us to obtain the things we want, so we help them in a quiet way. Boolbak isn't doing anyone any harm, but we didn't think you were ready to be exposed to too much non-con thinking all at once, as we knew Boolbak would do. He always does.

"But Darfla was so concerned, and she seemed to like you, so we took a chance. It seemed to work out, luckily for you."

Themus looked at the girl. She was staring at him as though a layer of ice covered her. He smiled to himself.

Any amount of ice can be thawed by the proper application of intensive heat.

"We didn't want you to see him at first," Deere went on, "because we knew he would dump the cart. But when you showed us you were flexible enough to do the five mad acts, we knew you could take what Boolbak had to say.

"And we let him explain it, instead of us, because he's one damned

fine story-teller. He can hold the interest. He's a born minstrel and you'd believe him before us."

"But why did he tell me all that? I thought you wanted it all kept quiet? He hardly knew me and he explained the whole situation, the way it really is. Why?" Themus inquired.

"Why? Because he's completely out of his mind—and he's a big-mouth to boot," Deere stated, "We tolerate Boolbak, but we make sure he keeps away from the Watchers, for the most part. If he does get through, though, it eventually shuttles to Furth and we snap a lid on it. I suppose he was ready to tell you because Darfla brought you to him. He has a soft spot for her.

"What I want to know is, why did Darfla take you off your rounds in the first place?"

Darfla looked up. She had been idly running her toe through the mud near the pool. "I went through his dossier. He was too brilliant for the Corps. His record indicated any number of checkpoints of upper-level intelligence. So I went and found him. He didn't react as most Stuffs would have, when I applied a few stimuli, such as ruining his dicto-box."

Themus winced at the memory of the dicto-box.

"But what made you look up his dossier?" demanded Furth.

Darfla hesitated, and a gold blush crept up her cheeks. "I saw him get off the ship from Penares-Base. I—well—I rather liked his appearance. You know." She looked down again, embarrassed.

Deere made a gun with thumb and forefinger, pointed it at her, "If you don't stop taking these things into your own hands! There's a group who looks into things like that. We'd have gotten to him in time."

Themus rubbed his nose in amazement. "I—I just can't believe all this. It's so fantastic. So unreal."

"No more unreal to believe every man is a single brain with individual thoughts than to believe he's a member of a group mind with the same thoughts for all."

He clapped the Watcher on the back.

"Are you prepared to drop your life as a Watcher and become one of us? I think you'll be quite a find. Your five acts were the maddest we've seen in a long time."

"But I'm not a Crackpot. I'm a Stuffed-Shirt. I've always been one."

"Bosh! You were brought up to think you were one. We've shown you there are other ways to think, now use them."

Themus considered. He'd never really had anything, as a member of the Kyben race—the rulers of the universe—but a constant unease and a fear of the Mines. These people all seemed so free, so clever, so—so— He was at a loss for words.

"Can you take me out of sight of the Corps?" he asked.

"Easiest thing in the world," said Furth, "to make you drop out of sight as Themus, the Watcher, and make you reappear as—let's say—Gugglefish, the Crackpot Mountebank."

Themus' face broke into the first full, unreserved smile he could recall. "It's a deal, I suppose. I've always wanted to live in a madhouse. The only thing that bothers me is Uncle Boolbak. You fool the Stuffs by pretending madness, and well—*you* consider Boolbak mad, so perhaps—"

He stopped when he saw the perplexed looks that came over the Crackpots' faces. It *was* a germ of thought.

"Welcome home, maniac," said Deere.

The pain in this one is the pain of a mind blocked from all joy and satisfaction by an outworn idea, an idée fixe, *a monomaniacal hangup that tunnels the vision. Think of someone you know, even someone you love, trapped into a corrupt or self-destructive or anti-social behavior pattern by an inability to get around the roadblock of erroneous thinking. Pathetic.*

The story is about a man and a woman. The woman is the good guy, the man is the dummy. When it appeared last year in Analog, *Kelly Freas did a drawing that showed the man as the stronger of the two, his body positioned in such a way that it looked as if he was protecting the lesser female. Wrong. I tried to get Ben Bova, the editor of* Analog, to get *Kelly to alter the drawing, but it was too close to the publication deadline, so it went in that way.*

But, much as I admire and respect Kelly, I took it not so much as a sexist attitude on his part—Polly wouldn't permit such an evil to exist—as an unconscious understanding of the massmind of the general Analog *readership, which is at core and primarily engineers, technicians, scientists, men of the drawing board and the spanner.*

So I wasn't perplexed or saddened when the story came in at the bottom of Analog's *Analytical Laboratory ratings. Where else would a story that says* machismo *is bullshit and a woman thinks more reasonably than a man come in? Diana King at the magazine assures me the short stories* always *come in last, but I think she's just trying to help me over a bad time; I handle rejection, I just don't handle it well.*

Nonetheless, I'm including it in this collection, an addition to the stories that appeared in previous editions of this book, not only to give you a little extra for your money, but because it's the latest in my Earth-Kyba War stories. And what with "The Crackpots" here, the first of the series, it makes a nice little package.

There's not much else to say about it. This isn't the most soul-sundering tale I've ever tried to write, it's just an attempt to do an actual, honest-to-God science fiction *story for* Analog. *To see if I could do it on my own terms. And to see if I could gig the* Analog *readers of thirty-and-more years' good standing, who would have coronary arrest at seeing Ellison in the hallowed pages of their*

favorite magazine. You can imagine my joy when I saw the issue on the newsstands, with my name on the front cover with Isaac Asimov's, knowing that Analog's *faithful would be gagging, and knowing the little jibe I had waiting for them inside with*

Sleeping Dogs

THE ONLY "POSITIVE" THING Lynn Ferraro could say about the destruction of the cities of Globar and Schall was that their burning made esthetically-pleasing smears of light against the night sky of Epsilon Indi IV.

"The stiffness of your back tells me you don't approve, Friend Ferraro." She didn't turn at his words, but she could feel her vertebrae cracking as she tensed. She kept her face turned to the screens, watching the twin cities shrink as the flames consumed them, a wild colossus whose pillared legs rose to meet a hundred meters above the debacle.

"A lot of good my disapproval does, Commander."

He made a sighing sound at her response. "Well, you have the satisfaction of knowing your report will more than likely terminate my career."

She turned on him, her facial muscles tight as sun-dried leather. "And a hell of a lot of good *that* does the people down there!"

She was an *Amicus Hostis*, a Friend of the Enemy, placed on board the Terran dreadnought *Descartes*, Solar Force registry number SFD/199-660, in this the forty-first year of the Earth-Kyba War, to prevent atrocities, to attempt *any kind* of rapprochment with the Kyben, should a situation present itself in which the Kyben would do other than kill or be killed. And when it had become clear that this lunatic, this butcher, this Commander Julian Drabix was determined to take the planet—at any cost—no matter how horrifyingly high—scorched earth if nothing short of that monstrousness would suffice—when it had become clear her command powers would be

ignored by him, she had filed a light-wave report with Terran Central. But it would take time for the report to reach Central, time for it to be studied, time for a report-judgment and time for instructions to be light-fired back to the *Descartes*. And Drabix had not waited. Contravening the authority of the *Amicus*, he had unleashed the full firepower of the dreadnought.

Globar and Schall burned like Sodom and Gomorrah.

But unlike those God-condemned hellholes of an ancient religion, no one knew if the residents of Globar and Schall were good, or evil, or merely frightened natives of a world caught in the middle of an interstellar war that seemed destined *never* to end.

"All I know," Drabix had said, by way of justification, "is that planet's atmospheric conditions are perfect for the formation of the crystalline form of the power-mineral we need. If we don't get it, Kyba will. It's too rare, and it's too important to vacillate. I'm sorry about this, but it has to be done." So he had done it.

She had argued that they didn't even know for certain if the mineral was *there*, in the enormous quantities Drabix believed were present. It was true the conditions were right for its formation and on similar worlds where the conditions were approximated they had found the precious crystals in small amounts . . . but how could even such a near-certainty justify destruction so total, so inhuman?

Drabix had chosen not to argue. He had made his choice, knowing it would end his career in the Service; but he was a patriot; and allegiance overrode all other considerations.

Ferraro despised him. It was the only word that fit. She despised everything about him, but this blind servitude to cause was the most loathsome aspect of his character.

And even that was futile, as Globar and Schall burned.

Who would speak the elegy for the thousands, perhaps millions, who now burned among the stones of the twin cities?

When the conflagration died down, and the rubble cooled, the *Descartes* sent down its reconnaissance ships; and after a time, Commander Drabix and Friend Ferraro went to the surface. To murmur among the ashes.

Command post had been set up on the island the natives called Stand of Light because of the manner in which the sunlight from Epsilon Indi was reflected back from the sleek boles of the gigantic

trees that formed a central cluster forest in the middle of the twenty-five kilometer spot of land. Drabix had ordered his recon teams to scour the planet and bring in a wide sample of prisoners. Now they stood in ragged ranks up and down the beach as far as Lynn Ferraro could see; perhaps thirty thousand men and women and children. Some were burned horribly.

She rode on the airlift platform with Drabix as he skimmed smoothly past them, just above their heads.

"I can't believe this," Drabix said.

What he found difficult to accept was the diversity of races represented in the population sample the recon ships had brought in. There were Bleshites and Mosynichii in worn leathers from the worlds of 61 Cygni, there were Camogasques in prayer togas from Epsilon Eridani, there were Kopektans and Livides from Altair II and X; Millmen from Tau Ceti, Oldonians from Lalande 21185, Runaways from Rigel; stalk-thin female warriors of the Seull Clan from Delta Cephei III, beaked Raskkans from the hollow asteroids of the Whip belt, squidlike Silvinoids from Grover; Petokii and Vulpeculans and Rohrs and Mawawanians and creatures even Drabix's familiarity with the Ephemeris could not identity.

Yet nowhere in the thousands of trembling and cursing prisoners—watching the airlift platform as it passed them—nowhere in that horde, could be seen even one single golden-skinned, tentacle-fingered Kyben. It was this, perhaps, that Drabix found the more impossible to accept. But it was so. Of the expeditionary force sent from far Kyba to hold this crossroads planet, not one survivor remained. They had all, to the last defender, suicided.

When the knowledge could no longer be denied, Lynn turned on Drabix and denounced him with words of his own choosing, words he had frequently used to vindicate his actions during the two years she had ridden as supercargo on the *Descartes*. " ' "War is not merely a political act but also a political instrument, a continuation of political relations, a carrying out of the same by other means," as Karl von Clausewitz has so perfectly said.' "

He snarled at her. "Shut your face, *Amicus!* I'm not in a mood for your stupidities!"

"And slaughter is not merely an act of war, is that right, Commander? Is it *also* a political instrument? Why not take me to see the

stacked corpses? Perhaps I can fulfill *my* mission . . . perhaps I'll learn to communicate with the dead! You deranged fool! You should be commanding an abattoir, not a ship of the line!"

He doubled his right fist and punched her full in the face, within sight of the endless swarm of helpless prisoners and his own crew. She fell backward, off the airlift, tumbling down into the throng. Their bodies broke her fall, and within seconds members of Drabix's crew had rescued her; but he did not see it; the airlift had skimmed away and was quickly lost in the flash of golden brilliance reflecting off the holy shining trees of Stand of Light.

The adjutant found her sitting on a greenglass boulder jutting up from the edge of the beach. Waves came in lazily and foamed around the huge shape. There was hardly any sound. The forest was almost silent; if there were birds or insects, they had been stilled, as though waiting.

"Friend Ferraro?" he said, stepping into the water to gain her attention. He had called her twice, and she had seemed too sunk in thought to notice. Now she looked down at him and seemed to re-focus with difficulty.

"Yes, I'm sorry, what is it Mr. Lalwani?"

"The Commander would like to see you."

Her expression smoothed over like the surface of the pale blue ocean. "Where is he?"

"On the main continent, Miz. He's decided to take the forms."

She closed her eyes in pain. "Dear souls in Hell . . . will there never be an end? Hasn't he done enough to this wretched backwash?" Then she opened her eyes and looked at him closely. "What does he want with me? Has there been a reply from Central? Does he simply want an audience?"

"I don't know, Miz. He ordered me to come and find you. I have a recon ship waiting, whenever you're ready."

She nodded. "Thank you, Mr. Lalwani. I'll be along in a few moments."

He saluted and walked away up the beach and around the bend. She sat staring out across the ocean; as always: an observer.

They had charted the positions of the fifty "forts" during the first

pass at the planet. Whether they were, in fact, forts was entirely supposition. At first they were thought to be natural rock formations—huge black cubes sunk into the earth of the tiny planet; featureless, ominous, silent—but their careful spacing around the equator made that unlikely. And the recon ships had brought back confirmation that they were created, not natural. *What* they were, remained a mystery.

Lynn Ferraro stood with Drabix and stared across the empty plain to the enormous black cube, fifty meters on a side. She could not remember ever having seen anything quite so terrifying. There was no reason to feel as she did, but she could not shake the oppression, the sense of impending doom. Even so, she had resolved to say nothing to Drabix. There was nothing that *could* be said. Whatever motivated him, whatever passions had come to possess him in his obsession about this planet, she knew no words she might speak to dissuade him.

"I wanted you here," he said, "because I'm still in charge of this operation, and whatever you may think of my actions I still follow orders. You're required to be in attendance, and I want *that* in the report."

"It's noted, Commander."

He glanced at her quickly. There had been neither tone nor inflection revealing her hatred, but it trembled in the air between them.

"I expected something more from you."

She continued staring at the black, featureless cube in the middle of the plain. "Such as?"

"A comment. An assessment of military priorities. A plea to spare these cultural treasures. Something . . . anything . . . to justify your position."

She looked at him and saw the depth of distaste he held for her. Was it her *Amicus* status, or herself he feared and despised. Had she been repelled less by his warrior manner, she might have pitied him—"There are men whom one hates until that moment when one sees, through a chink in their armor, the sight of something nailed down and in torment."

"The validity of my position will insure you never go to space again, Commander. If there were more I could do, something immediate

and final, I would do it, by all the sweet dear souls in Hell. But I can't. You're in charge here, and the best I can do is record what I think insane behavior."

His anger flared again, and for a moment she thought he might hit her a second time, and she dropped back a step into a self-defense position. The first time he had taken her unaware; there would be no second time; she was capable of crippling him.

"Let me tell you a thing, *Amicus*, Friend of the Enemy! You follow that word all the way? The *Enemy?* You're a paid spy for the Enemy. An Enemy that's out to kill us, every one of us, that will stop nowhere short of total annihilation of the human race. The Kyben feed off a hatred of humankind unknown to any other race in the galaxy . . ."

"My threshold for jingoism is very low, Commander. If you have some information to convey, do so. Otherwise, I'll return to Stand of Light."

He breathed deeply, damping his rage, and when he could speak again he said, "Whether this planet has what I think it has, or not, quite clearly it's been a prize for a long time. A *long* time. A lot longer than *either* of us can imagine. Long before the war moved into this sector. It's been conquered and reconquered and conquered all over again. The planet's *lousy* with every marauding race I've ever even *heard* of. The place is like Terran China . . . let itself be overrun and probably didn't even put up a fight. Let the hordes in, submitted, and waited for them to be swallowed up. But more kept coming. There's something here they all wanted."

She had deduced as much herself; she needed no long-winded superficial lectures about the obvious. "And you think whatever it is they wanted is in the fifty forts. Have you spoken to any of the prisoners?"

"I've seen intelligence reports."

"But have you spoken to any of the prisoners *personally?*"

"Are you trying to make a case for incompetence, too?"

"All I asked is if you've spoken—"

"*No, dammit, I haven't spoken to any of that scum!*"

"Well, you should have!"

"To what end, Friend?" And he waved to his adjutant.

Drabix was in motion now. Lynn Ferraro could see there was nothing short of assassination that would stop him. And that was

beyond her. "Because if you'd spoken to them, you'd have learned that whatever lives inside those forts has *permitted* the planet to be conquered. It doesn't care, as long as everyone minds their own business."

Drabix smiled, then snickered. "*Amicus*, go sit down somewhere, will you. The heat's getting to you."

"They say even the Kyben were tolerated, Commander. I'm warning you; let the forts alone."

"Fade off, Friend Ferraro. Command means decision, and my orders were to secure this planet. Secure doesn't mean fifty impregnable fortresses left untouched, and command doesn't mean letting bleeding hearts like you scare us into inaction with bogey men."

The Adjutant stood waiting. "Mr. Lalwani," Drabix said, "tell the ground batteries to commence on signal. Concentrate fire on the southern face of that cube."

"Yes, sir." He went away quickly.

"It's war, Commander. That's your only answer, that it's war?"

Drabix would not look at her now. "That's right. It's a war to the finish. They declared it, and it's been that way for forty years. I'm doing my job . . . and if that makes doing yours difficult, perhaps it'll show those pimply-assed bureaucrats at Central we need more ships and less Friends of the Enemy. *Something* has to break this stalemate with the Kyben, and even if I don't see the end of it I'll be satisfied knowing I was the one who broke it."

He gave the signal.

From concealed positions, lancet batteries opened up on the silent black cube on the plain.

Crackling beams of leashed energy erupted from the projectors, criss-crossed as they sped toward their target and impacted on the near face of the cube. Where they struck, novae of light appeared. Drabix lowered the visor on his battle helmet. "Protect your eyes, Friend," he warned.

Lynn dropped her visor, and heard herself shouting above the sudden crash of sound, "Let them alone!"

And in that instant she realized no one had asked the right question: where *were* the original natives of this world?

But it was too late to ask that question.

The barrage went on for a very long time.

Drabix was studying the southern face of the cube through a cyclop. The reports he had received were even more disturbing than the mere presence of the forts: the lancets had caused no visible damage.

Whatever formed those cubes, it was beyond the destructive capabilities of the ground batteries. The barrage had drained their power sources, and still the fort stood unscathed.

"Let them alone? Don't disturb them? *Now* do you see the danger, the necessity?" Drabix was spiralling upward, his frustration and anxiety making his voice brittle and high. "Tell me how we secure a war zone with the Enemy in our midst, Friend?"

"They aren't the Enemy!" she insisted.

"Leave them alone, eh?"

"They *want* to be left alone."

Drabix sneered at her, took one last look through the cyclop and pulled the communicator loose from his wristcuff. He spoke directly to the *Descartes*, hanging in space above them. "Mr. Kokonen!"

The voice came back, clear and sharp. "Yes, sir?"

"On signal, pour everything you've got into the primary lancets. Hit it dead center. And keep it going till you open it up."

"On signal, sir."

"Drabix! Wait for Central to—"

"Minus three!"

"Let it alone! Let me try another—"

"Minus two!"

"Drabix . . . stop. . . ."

"Minus one! Go to Hell, Friend!"

"You're out of your—"

"Commence firing!"

The lancet hurtled down out of the sky like a river of light. It struck the cube with a force that dwarfed the sum total of annihilation visited on the cube all that day. The sound rolled across the plain and the light was blinding. Explosions came so close together they merged into one endless report, the roof of the cube bathed in withering brilliance that rivaled the sun.

Lynn Ferraro heard herself screaming.

And suddenly, the lancet beam was cut off. Not from its source, but at its target. As though a giant, invisible hand had smothered the

beam, it hurtled down out of the sky from the invisible dreadnought far above and ended in the sky above the cube. Then, as Drabix watched with eyes widening and the *Amicus* watched with open terror choking her, the beam was snuffed out all along its length. It disappeared back up its route of destructive force, into the sky, into the clouds, into the upper atmosphere and was gone.

A moment later, a new sun lit the sky as the dreadnought *Descartes* was strangled with its own weapon. It flared suddenly, blossomed . . . and was gone.

Then the cube began to rise from the earth. However much larger it was than what was revealed on the plain, Lynn Ferraro could not begin to estimate. It rose up and up, now no longer a squat cube, becoming a terrifying pillar of featureless black that dominated the sky. Somehow, she knew at forty-nine other locations around the planet the remaining forts were also rising.

After endless centuries of solitude, whatever lived in those structures was awakening at last.

They had been content to let the races of the galaxy come and go and conquer and be assimilated, as long as they were not severely threatened. They might have allowed humankind to come here and exist, or they might have allowed the Kyben the same freedom. But not both.

Drabix was whimpering beside her.

And not even her pity for him could save them.

He looked at her, white-eyed. "You got your wish," she said "The war is over."

The original natives of the planet were taking a hand, at last. The stalemate was broken. A third force had entered the war. And whether they would be inimical to Terrans or Kyben, no one could know. *Amicus* Ferraro grew cold as the cube rose up out of the plain, towering above everything.

It was clear: roused from sleep, the inhabitants of the fifty forts would never consider themselves Friends of the Enemy.

"How did you come to write this story?" I am frequently asked, whether it be this story, or that one over there, or the soft pink-and-white one in the corner. Usually, I shrug helplessly. My ideas come from the same places yours come from: Compulsion City, about half an hour out of Schenectady. I can't give a more specific location than that. Once in a great while, I know specifically. The story that follows is one of those instances, and I will tell you. I attended the 22nd World Science Fiction Convention (Pacificon II) on Labor Day, 1964. For the past many "cons," a feature has been a fan-art exhibit, with artwork entered by non-professionals from all over the science fiction world. Several times (for some as-yet-unexplained reason) I have been asked to be among the judges of this show, and have found the level of work to be pleasantly high, in some cases really remarkable. On half a dozen occasions I have found myself wondering why the certain illustrator that impressed me was not working deep in the professional scene; and within a year, invariably, that artist has left the amateur ranks and become a selling illustrator. At the Pacificon, once again I attended the fan-art exhibition. I was in the company of Robert Silverberg, a writer whose name will not be unfamiliar to you, and the then-editor of Amazing Stories, *Cele Goldsmith Lalli (the Lalli had only recently been added, when that handsome bachelor lady finally threw in the sponge and married Mr. Lalli, in whose direction dirty looks for absconding with one of the ablest editors s-f had yet produced). Cele had been trying vainly to get a story out of me. I was playing coy. There had been days when the cent or cent-and-a-half* Amazing Stories *paid was* mucho dinero *to me, but now I was A Big Time Hollywood Writer (it says here somewhere) and I was enjoying saying stupid things like, "You can't afford me, Cele," or "I'll see if Joseph E. Levine will let me take off a week to write one for you . . . I'll have my agent call you." Cele was taking it staunchly. Since I was much younger, and periodically disrupted her efficient Ziff-Davis office, she had tolerated me with a stoic resign only faintly approached by The Colossus of Rhodes. "Okay, okay, big shot," she was replying, "I'll stretch it to two cents a word, and we both know you're being overpaid." I sneered, and marched away. It was something of a*

running gunbattle for two days. But, in point of fact, I was so tied up with prior commitments in television (that was my term of menial servitude on "The Outer Limits") that I knew I didn't have the time for short stories, much as I lusted to do a few, to keep my hand in. That Sunday morning in September, we were at the fan-art exhibit, and I was stopped in front of a display of scratchboard illustrations by a young man named Dennis Smith, from Chula Vista, California. They were extraordinary efforts, combining the best features of Finlay, Lawrence and Heinrich Kley. They were youthfully derivative, of course, but professionally executed, and one of them held me utterly fascinated. It was a scene on a foggy landscape, with a milk-wash of stars dripping down the sky, a dim outline of battlements in the distance, and in the foreground, a weird phosphorescent creature with great luminous eyes, holding a bag of skulls, astride a giant rat, padding toward me. I stared at it for a long while, and a small group of people clustered behind me, also held by the picture. "If somebody would buy that, I'd write the story for it," I heard myself say. And from behind me, Cele Goldsmith Lalli's margarine-warm voice replied, "I'll buy it for Fantastic; *you've got an assignment." I was trapped. Hell hath no fury like the wrath of an editor with single-minded devotion to duty. Around that strange, remarkable drawing, I wrote a story, one of my personal favorites. Dennis Smith had named the picture, so I felt it only seemly to title the story the same:*

Bright Eyes

FEET WITHOUT TOES. Softly-padded feet, furred. Footsteps sounded gently, padding furry, down ink-chill corridors of the place. A place Bright Eyes had inhabited since before time had substance. Since before places had names. A dark place, a shadowed place, only a blot against the eternally nightened skies. No stars chip-ice twittered insanely against that night; for in truth the night was mad enough.

Night was a condition Bright Eyes understood. And he knew about day. . .

He knew about almost everything.

The worms. The moles. The trunks of dead trees. The whites of eggs. Music. And random sounds. The sound fish make in the deep. The flares of the sun. The scratch of unbleached cloth against flesh. The hounds that roamed the tundra. The way those who have hair see it go pale and stiff with age. Clocks and what they do. Ice cream. Wax seals on parchment dedications. Grass and leaves. Metal and wood. Up and down. Here and most of there. Bright Eyes knew it all.

And that was the reason his padding, acoustically-sussurating footsteps hissed high in the dark, beamed, silent corridors of the place. And why he would now, forever at last, make that long journey.

The giant rat, whose name was Thomas, lay curled, fetid, sleeping, near the great wooden gate; and as Bright Eyes approached, it stirred. Then, like a mastiff, it lifted its bullet-shaped head, and the bright crimson eyes flickered artful awareness. The massive head stiffened on the neckless neck, and it shambled to its feet. The wire tail swished across hand-inset cobblestones, making scratching sounds in the silent night.

"It's time," Bright Eyes murmured. "Here, Thomas." The great grey creature jogged to him, nuzzling Bright Eyes' leg. It sniffed at the net filled with old skulls, and its whiskers twitched like cilia for a moment.

Bright Eyes swung the great wooden gate open with difficulty, dislodging caked dirt and cold-hardened clots of stray matter. The heavy metal ring clanged as he dropped it against the portal. Then Bright Eyes swung to the back of the rat, and without reins or prompting, the rat whose name was Thomas, paced steadily through the opening, leaving behind the only home Bright Eyes had ever known, which he would never see again. There was mist on the land.

Strange and terrible portents had caused Bright Eyes to leave the place. Unwilling to believe what they implied, at first, Bright Eyes pursued the gentle patterns of his days—like all the other days he had ever known, alone. But finally, when the blood-red and grey colors washed in unholy mixture down the skies, he knew what had happened, and that it was his obligation to return to a place he had never seen, had only heard about from others, centuries before, and

do what had to be done. The others were long-since dead: had been dead since before Christ took Barabbas' place on the cross. The place to which Bright Eyes must return had not even been known, had not even existed, when the others left the world. Yet it was Bright Eyes' place, by default, and his obligation to all the others who had passed before. Since he was the last of his kind, a race that had no name, and had dwelled in the castle-place for millennia, he only dimly understood what was demanded of him. Yet this he knew: the call had been made, the portents cast into the night to be seen by him; and he must go.

It was a journey whose length even Bright Eyes could not surmise. The mist seemed to cover the world in a soft shroud that promised little good luck on this mission.

And, inexplicably, to Bright Eyes, there was a crushing sadness in him. A sadness he did not fathom, could not plumb, dared not examine. His glowing sight pierced through the mist, as steadily and stately, Thomas moved toward Bright Eyes' final destination. And it would remain unknown, till he reached it.

Out of the mist the giant rat swung jauntily. They had passed among softly-rounded hills with water that dropped from above. Then the shoulders had become black rock, and gleaming pinpoints of diamond brilliance had shone in the rock, and Bright Eyes had realized they were in caves. But had they come from the land, inside . . . or had they come from some resting-land deep in the bowels of the Earth, into these less hidden caverns; and would they continue to another outside?

Far ahead, a dim light pulsed and glowed, and Bright Eyes spurred Thomas forward. The dim light grew more bold, more orange and yellow and menacing with sudden soft roars of bubbling thunder. And as they rounded the passage, the floor of the cave was gone, and in their path lay a boiling scar in the stone. A lava-pit torn up out of the solid stone, hissing and bubbling fiercely with demonic abandon. The light burned at Bright Eyes, and the heat was gagging. The sour stench of sulphur bit at his senses, and he made to turn aside.

The giant rat suddenly bolted in panic, arching back, more like caterpillar than rodent, and Bright Eyes was tossed to the floor of the

cave, his net of skulls rolling away from him. Thomas chittered in fear, and took steps away, then paused and returned to his master. Bright Eyes rose and patted the terrified beast several times. Thomas fell into quivering silence.

Bright Eyes retrieved the skulls. All but one, that had rolled across the stone floor and disappeared with a vagrant hiss into the flame-pit. The giant rat sniffed at the walls, first one, then the other, and settled against the far one. Bright Eyes contemplated the gash in the stone floor. It stretched completely across, and as far as he could tell, forward. Thomas chittered.

Bright Eyes looked away from the flames, into the fear-streaked eyes of the beast. "Well, Thomas?" he asked. The rat's snout twitched, and it hunkered closer to the wall. It looked up at Bright Eyes imploringly. Bright Eyes came to the rat, crouched down, stroked its neat, tight fur. Bright Eyes brushed the wall. It was not hot. It was cool.

The rat knew.

Bright Eyes rose, walked back along the passage. He found the parallel corridor half a mile back in the direction they had come. Without turning, he knew Thomas had silently followed, and leading the way, he moved down the parallel corridor, in coolness. Even the Earth could not keep Bright Eyes from what had to be done.

They followed the corridor for a very long time, till the rock walls leaned inward, and the littered floor tilted toward the stalactite-spiked ceiling. Bright Eyes dismounted, and walked beside the giant rat. There were strange, soft murmurings beneath them. Thomas chittered every time the Earth rattled. Further on, the passage puckered narrower and narrower . . . and Bright Eyes was forced to bend, then stoop, then crawl. Thomas slithered belly-tight behind him, more frightened to be left behind than to struggle forward.

A whisper of chill, clean air passed them.

They moved ahead, only the glow of Bright Eyes marking a passage.

Abruptly, the cave mouth opened onto darkness, and cold, and the world Bright Eyes had never seen, the world his dim ancestors had left, millennia before.

No one could ever set down what that first sight meant to Bright

Eyes. But . . . the chill he felt, was not the chill of the night wind.

The countryside was a murmuring silence. The sky was so black, not even the stars seemed at home. Frightened, lonely and alienated from the universe they populated, the silver specks drifted down the night like chalkdust. And through the strangeness, Bright Eyes rode Thomas, neither seeing nor caring. Behind him a village passed over the horizon line, and he never knew he had been through it.

No shouts of halt were hurled on the wind. No one came to darkened windows to see Bright Eyes pass through. He was approaching there and gone, all in an instant of time that may have been forever and may have been never. He was a wraith on the mist-bottomed silence. And Thomas moved stately through valley and village, only paced, nothing more. From now on, it was Bright Eyes' problem.

Far out on the plains, the wind opened up suddenly. It spun down out of the northwest and drove at Bright Eyes' back. And on the trembling coolness, the alien sounds of wild dogs came snapping across the emptiness. Bright Eyes looked up, and Thomas' neck-hair bristled with fear. Bright Eyes stroked a round, palpitating ear and the great rat came under control.

Then, almost without sound that was tied to them—for the sound of dogs came from a distance, from far away—the insane beasts were upon them. A slavering band of crimson-eyed mongrels, some still wearing dog collars and clinking tags, hair grown shaggy and matted with filth. Noses with large nostrils, as though they had had to learn to forage the land all at once, rather than from birth. These were the dogs of the people, driven out onto the wind, to live or die or eat each other as best they could.

The first few leaped from ten feet away, high and flat in trajectories that brought them down on Thomas' back, almost into Bright Eyes' lap, their yellow teeth scraping and clattering like dice on cement, lunacy bubbling out of them as froth and stench and spastic claw-scrabblings. Thomas reared and Bright Eyes slid off without losing balance, using the bag of skulls as a mace to ward off the first of the vicious assaults. One great Doberman had its teeth set for a strike into Thomas' belly, but the great rat—with incredible ferocity and

skill—snapped it head down in a scythelike movement, and rent the grey-brown beast from jowl to chest, and it fell away, bleeding, moaning piteously.

And the rest of the pack materialized from the darkness. Dozens of them, circling warily now that one of their number lay in a trembling-wet garbage heap of its own innards.

Bright Eyes whistled Thomas to him with a soft sound. They stood together, facing the horde, and Bright Eyes called up a talent his race had not been forced to use in uncounted centuries.

The great white eyes glowed, deep and bubbling as cauldrons of lava, and a hollow moaning came from a place deep in Bright Eyes' throat. A sound of torment, a sound of fear, an evocation of Gods that were dust before the Earth began to gather moisture to itself in the senseless cosmos, before the Moon had cooled, before the patterns of magnetism had settled the planets of the Solar System in their sockets.

Out of that sound, the basic fiber of emotion, like some great machine phasing toward top-point efficiency, Bright Eyes drew himself tight and unleashed the blast of pure power at the dogs.

Buried deep in his mind, the key to pure fear as a weapon was depressed, and in a blinding fan of sweeping brilliance, the emotion washed out toward the horde, a comber of undiluted, unbuffered terror. For the first time in centuries, that immense power was unleashed. Bright Eyes *thought* them terrified, and the air stank with fear.

The dogs, bulge-eyed and hysterical, fled in a wave of yipping, trembling, tuck-tailed quivering.

As if the night could no longer contain the immensity of it, the shimmering sound of terror bulged and grew, seeking release in perhaps another dimension, some higher threshold of audibility, and finding none—it wisped away in darkness and was gone.

Bright Eyes stood trembling uncontrollably, every fiber of his body spasming. His pineal gland throbbed. An intracranial tumor—whose presence in a human brain would have meant death—absolutely imperative for Bright Eyes' coordinated thought processes, which had swollen to five times its size as he concentrated, till his left temple had bulged with the pressing growth of it . . . now shrank, subsided,

sucked itself back down into the grey brain matter, the gliomas itself. And slowly, as the banked fires of his eyes softened once more, Bright Eyes came back to full possession of himself.

"It has been a very long time since that was needed," he said gently, and dwelt for a moment on the powers his race had possessed, powers long-since gone to forgetfulness.

Now that it was over, the giant rat settled to the ground, licking at its fur, at a slash in the flesh where one of the mad things had ripped and found meat.

Bright Eyes went to him. "They are the saddest creatures of all. They are alone." Thomas continued licking at his wounds.

Days later, but closer to their final destination, they came to the edge of a great river. At one time it had been a swiftly-moving stream, whipping itself high in a pounding torrent filled with colors and sounds; but now it flushed itself to the sea wearily, riding low in its own tide-trough, and hampered by the log-jam. The log-jam was made of corpses.

Bodies, hideously bloated and maggot-white puffed out of human shapes, lay across one another, from the near shore to the opposite bank. Thousands of bodies, uncountable thousands, twisted and piled and washed together till it would have been possible to cross the river on the top layer of naked men's faces, bleached women's backs, twisted children's hands crinkled as if left too long in water. For they had been.

As far upstream as Bright Eyes could see, and as far downstream as the bend of the banks permitted, it was the same. No movement, save the very seldom jiggle of a corpse as the water passed through. For they were packed so deep, and so tight, that in truth only water at its most sluggish could wanly press through. Yet the water gurgled and twittered among them, stealing slowly downstream—caressing rotting flesh in obscene parody: water, cleansing stepping-stones; polishing and smoothing and drenching them senselessly as it marks its passage only by what is left behind.

That was the ultimate horror of this river of dead: that the tide—no matter how held-back now—continued unheeding as it had since the world was born. For the world went on. And did not care.

Bright Eyes stood silently. At the bottom of the short slope that

ended with shoreline, bodies were strewn in a jackstraw tumble. He breathed very deeply, fighting for air, and the shivering started again. As it grew more pronounced, there was a movement in the dry-moist river bed. Bodies abruptly began to move. They trembled as though roiling in a stream growing turbulent. Then, one by one, they re-arranged themselves. All up and down the length of the river, the bodies shifted and moved and lifted without aid from their original positions, and far off, where their movement to neatness could not be seen, there came the roar of dammed-up water breaking free, surging forward, freed from its restraining walls of once-human flesh.

As Bright Eyes trembled, power surging through his slight frame, his eyes seeming to wax and wane with currents of electricity, the river of corpses freed itself from its log-jam, and was open once more.

The water poured in a great frothing wave down and down the corpse-bordered trough of the river. It broke out of a box-canyon to Bright Eyes' left, like a wild creature penned too long and at last set free on the wind. It came bubbling, boiling, threshing forward, passed the spot where he stood, and hurled itself away around the bend in the shoreline.

As Bright Eyes felt the trembling pass, the river rose, and rose, and gently now, rose. Covering the ghastly residue of humanity that now lay submerged beneath the mud-blackened waters.

The eyes of the trembling creature, the eyes of the giant rat, the eyes of the uncaring day were blessedly relieved of the sight of decay and death.

Emotions washed quickly, one after another, down his features; washed as quickly as the river had concealed its sad wealth; colors of sadness, imprinted in a manner no human being could ever have conceived, for the face that supported these emotions was of a race that had vanished before man had walked the Earth.

Then Bright Eyes turned, and with the rat, walked upstream. Toward the morning.

When the bleeding birds went over, the sun darkened. Great irregular, hard-edged clouds of them, all species, all wingspreads—but silent. Passing across the broad, grey brow of the sky, heading absolutely nowhere, they turned off the sun. It was suddenly chill as a

crypt. Heading East. Not toward warmth, or instinct, or destination . . . just anywhere, nowhere. Until they wearied, expired, dropped. Not manna, garbage. Live garbage that fell in hundred-clots from the beat-winged flights.

Many dropped, fluttering idly as if too weary to fight the air-currents any longer. As though what tiny instinctual brain-substance they had possessed, was now baked, turned to jelly, squashed by an unnameable force into an ichorous juice that ran out through their eyes. As though they no longer cared to live, much less to continue this senseless flight East to nowhere . . .

. . . and they bled.

A rain of bird's blood, sick and discolored. It misted down, beading Bright Eyes, and the stiff rat fur, and the trees, and the still, silent, dark land.

Only the dead, flat no-sound of millions of wings metronomically beating, beating, beating . . .

Bright Eyes shuddered, turned his face from the sight above, and finding himself unable to look, yet unable to end the horror as he had the mad dogs or the water of corpses, sought surcease in his own personal vision.

And this, which had driven him forth, was his vision:

Sleeping, deep in that place where he had lived so long, Bright Eyes had felt the subtle altering of tempo in the air around him. It was nothing as obvious as machinery beginning to whirr, trembling the walls around him; nor as complex as a shift in dimensional orientation. It was, rather, a soft sliding in the molecules of everything except Bright Eyes. For an instant everything went just slightly out of synch, a little fuzzy, and Bright Eyes came awake sharply. The *thing* that had occurred, was something his race had pre-set aeons before. It was triggered to activate itself—whatever "itself" was—after certain events had *possibly* happened.

The fact that this shifting had occurred, made Bright Eyes grow cold and wary. He had expected to die without its ever having come. But now, this was the time, and it *had* happened, and he waited for the next phase.

It came quickly. The vision.

The air before him grew even more indistinct, more roiled, like a pool of quicksilver smoke tumbling in and in on itself. And from that

cloudiness the image of the last of the Castellans took shape. (Was it image, or reality, or thought within his head? He did not really know, for Bright Eyes was merely the last of his kind, no specially-trained adept, and much of what his race had been, and knew, was lost to him, beyond him.)

The Castellan was a fifth-degree adept, and surely the last remaining one of Bright Eyes' race to—go. He wore the purple and blue of royalty, from a House Bright Eyes did not recognize, but the cut of the robe was shorter than styles Bright Eyes recalled as having been current—then. And the Castellan's cowl was up, revealing a face that was bleak with sorrow and even a hint of cruelty. Such was not present, of course, for the Castellans merely performed their duties, but Bright Eyes was certain *this* adept had been against the decision to—go. Yet he had been chosen to bring the message to Bright Eyes.

He stood, booted and silent, in the soft-washed blue and white lightness of Bright Eyes' sleeping chamber. Bright Eyes was given time to come to full wakefulness, and then the Castellan spoke.

"What you see has been gone for ten centuries. I am the last, save you. They have set me the task, and this twist of my being, of telling you what you must do. If the proper portents trigger my twist to appear before you—pray it never happens—than you must go to the city of the ones with hair, the ones who come after us, the ones who inherit the Earth, the men. Go to their city, with a bag of skulls of our race. You will know what to do with them.

"Know this, Bright Eyes: we go voluntarily. Some of us—and I am one of them—more reluctantly than most. It is a decision that seems only proper. Those who come after us, Men, will have their chance for the stars. This was the only gift of birth we could offer. No other gift can have meaning between us. They must have our chance, so we have gone to the place where you now lie. By the time I appear to you—if ever I do—we will be gone. This is the way of it, a sad and inescapable way. You will be the last. And now I will show you a thing."

The Castellan raised his hands before his face, and as though they were growing transparent, they glowed with an inner fire. The Visioning power. The Castellan's face suffused with flames as it conjured up the proper vision for Bright Eyes.

It appeared out of lines of blossoming crimson force, in the very air

beside the Castellan. A vision of terror and destruction. Flames man-made and devastating, incredible in their hell-fire. Like some great arachnid of pure force, the demon flames of the destruction swept and washed across the vision, and when it faded, Bright Eyes lay shaken by what he had seen.

"If this that I have showed you ever comes to pass, then my twist will appear to you. And if you ever hear me as you hear me now, then go, with the bag of skulls of our people. And do not doubt your feelings.

"For if I appear to you, it will all have been in vain, and those of us who were less pure in our motivations, will have been proved right."

Shimmering substance, coalescing nothingness, air that trembled and twittered in re-forming, and the Castellan was gone. Bright Eyes rose, and gathered the skulls from the crypt. Then:

Feet without toes. Softly-padded feet, furred. Footsteps sounded gently, padding furry, down ink-chill corridors of the place. A place Bright Eyes had inhabited since before time had substance. He walked through night, out of the place.

Night was a condition Bright Eyes understood. And he knew about day . . .

The bleeding birds were long-since gone. Bright Eyes moved through the days, and onward. At one point he passed through a sector of trembling mountains, that heaved up great slabs of rock and hurled them away like epileptics ridding themselves of clothes. The ground trembled and burst and screamed and the very Earth went insane to tunes of destruction it had never written.

There was a plain of dead grass, sere and wasted with great heaps of desiccated insects heaped here, there. They had flocked together to the last resting-place, and the plain of dead grass was poor tapestry indeed to hold the imprisoned pigments of their dead flesh, the acrid and bitter-sweet pervasive odor of formic acid that lingered like hot breath of a mad giant across the silent windless emptiness. Yet, how faint, a sound of weeping. . .?

Finally, Bright Eyes came to the city.

Thomas would not enter. The twisted rope-pillars of smoke that still climbed relentlessly to the dark sky; the terrible sounds of steel cracking and masonry falling into empty streets; the charnel house odor. Thomas would not go in.

But Bright Eyes was compelled to enter. Into that last debacle of all. From where it had begun.

The dead were everywhere, sighing soundlessly with milk-white eyes at a tomorrow that had never come. And each fallen one soundlessly spoke the question of why. Bright Eyes walked with the burden of chaos pulsing in him. This is what it had come to.

For this, his race had gone away. That the ones with hair, the men they had been called, they had called themselves, could stride the Earth. How cheap they had left it all. How cheap, how thin, how sordid. This was the last of it, the last of the race of men. Dust and dead.

Down a street, women pleading out of death for mercy.

Through what had been a park, old men humped crazily in rigorous failure to escape.

Past a structure, building front ripped away as if fingernails had shorn it clean. Children's arms, pocked and burned, dangling. Tiny hands.

To another place. Not like the place from which Bright Eyes had come, but the place to which he had journeyed. No special marker, just . . . a place. Sufficient.

And then it was, that Bright Eyes sank to his knees, crying. Tears that had not been seen since before Man had come from caves, tears that Bright Eyes had never known. Infinite sadness. Cried. Cried for the ghosts of the creatures with hair, cried for Men. For Man. Each Man. The Man who had done away with himself so absurdly, so completely. Bright Eyes, on his knees, sorrowing for the ones who had lived here, and were gone, leaving him to the night, and the silence, and eternity. A melody never to be heard again.

He placed the skulls. Down in the soft white ash. Unresponsive, dying Earth, receiving its burden testament.

Bright Eyes, last of a race that had condemned itself to extinction, had condemned *him* to living in darkness forever, and had had only the saving wistful knowledge that the race coming after, would live in the world. But now, gone, all of them, taking the world with them, leaving instead—no fair exchange—charnel house.

And Bright Eyes; alone.

Not only *their* race had been destroyed, in vain, but *his*, centuries

turned to mud and diamonds in their markerless graves, had passed in futility. It had all, all of it, been for nothing.

So Bright Eyes—never Man—was the last man on Earth. Keeper of a silent graveyard; echoless tomb monument to the foolishness, the absurdity, of nobility.

Pretty people have it easier than uglies. It smacks of cliche, and yet the lovelies of this world, defensive to the grave, will say, tain't so. They will contend that nice makes it harder for them. They get hustled more, people try to use them more, and to hear girls tell it, their good looks are nothing but curse, curse, curse. But stop to think: at least a good-looking human being has that *much going for openers. Plain to not-so-nice-at-all folk have to really jump for every little crumb. Things come harder to them. The reasoning of the rationale is a simple one, we worship the Pepsi Generation. We have a pathological lemming drive to conceal our age, lift our faces, dress like overblown Shirley Temples, black that grey in the hair, live a lie. What ever happened to growing old gracefully, the reverence of maturity, the search for character as differentiated from superficial comeliness? It be a disease, I warn you. It will rot you from the inside, while the outside glows. It will escalate into a culture that can never tolerate*

The Discarded

BEDZYK SAW RIILA GO MAD, and watched her throw herself against the lucite port, till her pinhead was a red blotch of pulped flesh and blood. He sighed, and sucked deeply from his massive bellows chest, and wondered how *he,* of all the Discards, had been silently nominated the leader. The ship hung in space, between the Moon and Earth, unwanted, unnoticed, a raft adrift in the sea of night.

Around him in the ship's saloon, the others watched Riila killing herself, and when her body fell to the rug, they turned away, allowing Bedzyk his choice of who was to dispose of her. He chose John Smith—the one with feathers where hair should have been—and the nameless one who clanged instead of talking.

The two of them lifted her heavy body, with its tiny pea of head,

and carried it to the garbage port. They emptied it, opened it, tossed her inside, redogged and blew her out. She floated past the saloon window on her way sunward. In a moment she was lost.

Bedzyk sat down in a deep chair and drew breath whistlingly into his mighty chest. It was a chore, being leader of these people.

People? No, that was certainly not the word. These Discards. That was a fine willowy word to use. They were scrap, refuse, waste, garbage themselves. How fitting for Riila to have gone that way, out the garbage port. They would *all* bid goodbye that way some day. He noted there was no 'day' on the ship. But some good *something*—maybe day, maybe night—each of them would go sucking out that port like the garbage.

It had to be that way. They were Discards.

But people? No, they were not people. Poeple did not have hooks where hands should have been, nor one eye, nor carapaces, nor humps on chests and backs, nor fins, nor any of the other mutations these residents of the ship sported. People were normal. Evenly matched sets of arms and legs and eyes. Evenly matched husbands, wives. Evenly distributed throughout the Solar System, and evenly dividing the goods of the System between themselves and the frontier worlds at the Edge. And all happily disposed to let the obscene Discards die in their prison ship.

"She's gone."

He had pursed his lips, had sunk his perfectly normal head onto his gigantic chest, and had been thinking. Now he looked up at the speaker. It was John Smith, with feathers where hair should have been.

"I said: she's gone."

Bedzyk nodded without replying. Riila had been just one more in the tradition. They had already lost over two hundred Discards from the ship. There would be more.

Strange how these—he hesitated again to use the word *people*, finally settled on the word they used among themselves: creatures—these *creatures* had steeled themselves to the death of one of their kind. Or perhaps they did not consider the rest as malformed as themselves. Each person on the ship was different. No two had been affected by the Sickness in the same way. The very fibers of the

muscles had altered with some of these creatures, making their limbs useless; on others the pores had clogged on their skin surfaces, eliminating all hair. On still others strange juices had been secreted in the blood stream, causing weird growths to erupt where smoothness had been. But perhaps each one thought he was less hideous than the others. It was conceivable. Bedzyk knew his great chest was not nearly as unpleasant to look upon as, say, Samswope's spiny crest and twin heads. *In fact,* Bedzyk mused wryly, *many people might think it was becoming, this great wedge of a chest, all matted with dark hair and heroic-seeming. Uh-huh, the others are pretty miserable to look at, but not me, especially.* Yes, it was conceivable.

In any case, they paid no attention now, if one of their group killed himself. They turned away; most of them were better off dead, anyhow.

Then he caught himself.

He was starting to get like the rest of them! He had to stop thinking like that. It wasn't right. No one should be allowed to take death like that. He resolved, the next one would be stopped, and he would deliver them a stern warning, and tell the Discards that they would find landfall soon, and to buck up.

But he knew he would sit and watch the next time, as he had this time. For he had made the same resolve before Riila had gone.

Samswope came into the saloon—he had been on KP all 'day' and both his heads were dripping with sweat—and picked his way among the conversing groups of Discards to the seat beside Bedzyk.

"Mmm." It was a greeting; he was identifying his arrival.

"Hi, Sam. How was it?"

"Metsoo-metz," he gibed, imitating Scalomina (the one-eyed ex-plumber, of Sicilian descent), tipping his hand in an obvious Scalominian gesture. "I'll live. Unfortunately." He added the last word with only a little drop of humor.

"Did I ever tell you the one about the Candy-Ass Canadian Boil-Sucker?" He didn't even smile as he said it; with either head. Bedzyk nodded wearily: he didn't want to play that game. "Yeah, well," Samswope said wearily. He sat silently for several long moments, then added, with irony, "But did I tell you I was married to her?" His wife had turned him in.

Morbidity ran knee-deep on the ship.

"Riila killed herself a little bit ago," Bedzyk said carelessly. There was no other way to say it.

"I figured as much," Samswope explained. "I saw them carrying her past the galley to the garbage lock. That's number six this week alone. You going to do anything, Bedzyk?"

Bedzyk twisted abruptly in his chair. He leveled a gaze at a spot directly between Samswope's two heads. His words were bitter with helplessness and anger that the burden should be placed upon him. "What do you mean, what am *I* going to do? I'm a prisoner here, too. When they had the big roundup, I got snatched away from a wife and three kids, the same as you got pulled away from your used car lot. What the hell do you want me to do? Beg them not to bash their heads against the lucite, it'll smear our nice north view of space!"

Samswope wiped both hands across his faces simultaneously in a weary pattern. The blue eyes of his left head closed, and the brown eyes of his right head blinked quickly. His left head, which had been speaking till now, nodded onto his chest. His right head, the nearly-dumb one, mumbled incoherently—Samswope's left head jerked up, and a look of disgust and hatred clouded his eyes. "Shut up, you—fucking moron!" He cracked his right head with a full fist.

Bedzyk watched without pity. The first time he had seen Samswope flail himself—would flagellate be a better term?—he had pitied the mutant. But it was a constant thing now, the way Samswope took his agony out on the dumb head. And there were times Bedzyk thought Samswope was better off than most. At least he had a release valve, an object of hate.

"Take it easy, Sam. Nothing's going to help us, not a single, lousy th—"

Samswope snapped a look at Bedzyk, then catalogued the thick arms and huge chest of the man, and wearily murmured: "Oh, I don't know, Bedzyk, I don't know." He dropped his left head into his hands. The right one winked Bedzyk with the archness of an imbecile. Bedzyk shuddered and looked away.

"If only we could have made that landing on Venus," Samswope intoned from the depths of his hands. "If only they'd let us in."

"You ought to know by now, Sam," Bedzyk reminded him bitterly,

"there's no room for us in the System at all. No room on Earth and nowhere else. They've got allocations and quotas and assignments. So many to Io, so many to Callisto, so many to Luna and Venus and Mars and anyplace else you might want to settle down. No room for Discards. No room in space, at all."

Across the saloon three fish-men, their heads encased in bubbling clear helmets, had gotten into a squabble, and two of them were trying to open the petcock on the third's helmet. This was something else again; the third fish-man was struggling, he didn't want to die gasping. This was not a suicide, but a murder, if they let it go unchecked.

Bedzyk leaped to his feet and hurled himself at the two attacking fish-men. He caught one by the bicep and spun him. His fist was half-cocked before he realized one solid blow would shatter the water-globe surrounding the fish-face, would kill the mutant. Instead, he took him around and shoved him solidly by the back of the shoulders, toward the compartment door. The fish-man stumbled away, breathing bubbly imprecations into his life water, casting furious glances back at his companions. The second fish-man came away of his own accord and followed the first from the saloon.

Bedzyk helped the last fish-man to a relaxer and watched disinterestedly as the mutant let a fresh supply of air bubbles into the circulating water in the globe. The fish-man mouthed a lipless thanks, and Bedzyk passed it away with a gesture. He went back to his seat.

Samswope was massaging the dumb head. "Those three'll never grow up.

Bedzyk fell into the chair. "You wouldn't be too happy living inside a goldfish bowl yourself, Swope."

Samswope stopped massaging the wrinkled yellow skin of the dumb head, seemed prepared to snap a retort, but a blip and clear-squawk from the intercom stopped him.

"Bedzyk! Bedzyk, you down there?" It was the voice of Harmony Teat up in the drive room. Why was it they always called *him?* Why did they persist in making him their arbiter?

"Yeah, I'm here, in the saloon. What's up?"

The squawk-box blipped again and Harmony Teat's mellow voice came to him from the ceiling. "I just registered a ship coming in on us,

off about three-thirty. I checked through the ephemeris and the shipping schedules. Nothing supposed to be out there. What should I do? You think it's a customs ship from Earth?"

Bedzyk heaved himself to his feet. He sighed. "No, I don't think it's a customs ship. They threw us out, but I doubt if they have the imagination or gall to extract tithe from us for being here. I don't know what it might be, Harmony. Hold everything and record any signals they send. I'm on my way upship."

He strode quickly out of the saloon, and up the cross-leveled ramps toward the drive room. Not till he had passed the hydroponics level did he realize Samswope was behind him. "I, uh, thought I'd come along, Bed," Samswope said apologetically, wringing his small, red hands. "I didn't want to stay down there with those—those freaks."

His dumb head hung off to one side, sleeping fitfully.

Bedzyk did not answer. He turned on his heel and casually strode updecks, not looking back.

There was no trouble. The ship identified itself when it was well away. It was an Attaché Carrier from System Central in Butte, Montana, Earth. The supercargo was a SpecAttaché named Curran. When the ship pulled alongside the Discard vessel and jockeyed for grappling position, Harmony Teat (her long grey-green hair reaching down past the spiked projections on her spinal column) threw on the *attract* field for that section of the hull. The Earth ship clunked against the Discard vessel, and the locks were synched in.

Curran came across without a suit.

He was a slim, incredibly tanned young man with a crewcut clipped so short a patch of nearly-bald showed at the center of his scalp. His eyes were alert and his manner was brisk and friendly, that of the professional dignitary in the Foreign Service.

Bedzyk did not bother with amenities.

"What do you want?"

"Who may I be addressing, sir, if I may ask?" Curran was the perfect model of diplomacy.

"Bedzyk is what I was called on Earth." Cool, disdainful, I may-be-hideous-but-I-still-have-a-little-pride.

"My name is Curran, Mr. Curran, Mr. Bedzyk. Alan Curran of

System Central. I've been asked to come out and speak to you about——"

Bedzyk settled against the bulkhead opposite the lock, not even offering the Attaché an invitation to return to the saloon.

"You want us to get out of your sky, is that it? You stinking lousy . . ." He faltered in fury. He could not finish the sentence, so steeped in anger was he. "You set off too many bombs down there, and eventually some of us with something in our bloodstreams react to it, and we turn into monsters. What do you do . . . you call it the Sickness and you pack us up whether we want to go or not, and you shove us into space."

"Mr. Bedzyk, I—"

"You *what?* You damned well *what,* Mr. System Central? With your straight, clean body and your nice home on Earth, and your allocations of how many people live where, to keep the balance of culture just so! You *what?* You want to invite us to leave? Okay, we'll go!" He was nearly screeching, his face crimson with emotion, his big hands knotted at his sides for fear he would strike this emissary.

"We'll get out of your sky. We've been all the way out to the Edge, Mr. Curran, and there's no room in space for us anywhere. They won't let us land even on the frontier worlds where we can pay our way. Oh no; contamination, they think. Okay, don't shove, Curran, we'll be going."

He started to turn away, was nearly down the passageway, when Curran's solid voice stopped him: "Bedzyk!"

The wedge-chested man turned. Curran was unsticking the seam that sealed his jumper top. He pulled it open and revealed his chest.

It was covered with leprous green and brown sores. His face was a blasted thing, then. He was a man with Sickness, who wanted to know how he had acquired it—how he could be rid of it. On the ship, they called Curran's particular deformity 'the runnies.'

Bedzyk walked back slowly, his eyes never leaving Curran's face. "They sent you to talk to us?" Bedzyk asked, wondering.

Curran resealed the jumper, and nodded. He laid a hand on his chest, as though wishing to be certain the sores would not run off and leave him. A terror swam brightly in his young eyes.

"It's getting worse down there, Bedzyk," he said as if in a terrible

need for hurrying. "There are more and more changing every day. I've never seen anything like it—"

He hesitated, shuddered.

He ran a hand over his face, and swayed slightly, as though whatever memory he now clutched to himself was about to make him faint. "I—I'd like to sit down."

Bedzyk took him by the elbow, and led him a few steps toward the saloon. Then Dresden, the girl with the glass hands—who wore monstrous cotton-filled gloves—came out from the connecting passage leading to the saloon, and Bedzyk thought of the hundred weird forms Curran would have to face. In his condition, that would be bad. He turned the other way, and led Curran back up to the drive room. Bedzyk waved at a control chair. "Have a seat."

Curran looked collegiate-boy shook up. He sank into the chair, again touching his chest in disbelief. "I've been like this for over two months . . . they haven't found out yet; I've tried to keep myself from showing it. . . ."

He was shivering wildly.

Bedzyk perched on the shelf of the plot-tank, and crossed his legs. He folded his arms across his huge chest and looked at Curran. "What do they want down there? What do they want from their beloved Discards?" He savored the last word with the taste of alum.

"It's, it's so bad you won't believe it, Bedzyk." He ran a hand through his crewcut, nervously. "We thought we had the Sickness licked. There was every reason to believe the atmosphere spray Terra Pharmaceuticals developed would end it. They sprayed the entire planet, but something they didn't even know was in the spray, and something they only half-suspected in the Sickness combined, and produced a healthier strain.

"That was when it started getting bad. What had been a hit-and-miss thing—with just a few like yourselves, with some weakness in your bloodstreams making you susceptible—became a rule instead of an exception. People started changing while you watched. I—I—" he faltered again, shuddered at a memory.

"My, my fiancée," he went on, looking at his attaché case and his hands, "I was eating lunch with her in Rockefeller Plaza's Skytop. We had to be back at work in Butte in twenty minutes, just time to catch a cab, and she—she —*changed* while we were sitting there. Her eyes,

they, they—I can't explain it, you can't know what it was like seeing them water and run down her ch-cheeks like that, it was—" his face tightened up as though he were trying to keep himself from going completely insane.

Bedzyk sharply curbed the hysteria. "We have seven people like that on board right now. I know what you mean. And they aren't the worst. Go on, you were saying?"

Such prosaic acceptance of the horror brought Curran's frenzy down. "It got so bad everyone was staying in the sterile shelters. The streets always empty; it was horrible. Then some quack physician out in Cincinnati or somewhere like that came up with an answer. A serum made from a secretion in the bloodstreams of—of—"

Bedzyk added the last word for him: "Of Discards?"

Curran nodded soberly.

Bedzyk's hard-edged laugh rattled against Curran's thin film of calm. He jerked his eyes to the man sitting on the plot-tank. A furious expression came over him.

"What are you laughing at? We need your help! We need all you people as blood donors."

Bedzyk stopped laughing abruptly. "Why not use the changed ones from down there." He jerked a thumb at the big lucite viewport where Earth hung swollen and multicolored. "What's wrong with them—" and he added with malice "—with you?" Curran twitched as he realized he could so easily be lumped in with the afflicted.

"We're no good. We were changed by this new mutated Sickness. The secretion is different in our blood than it is in yours. You were stricken by the primary Sickness, or virus, or whatever they call it. We have a complicated one. But the way the research has outlined it, the only ones who have what we need, are you Dis—" he caught himself "—you people who were shipped out before the Sickness itself mutated."

Bedzyk snorted contemptuously. He let a wry, astonished smirk tickle his lips. "You Earthies are fantastic." He shook his head in private amusement.

He slipped off the plot-tank's ledge and turned to the port, talking half to himself, half to a nonexistent third person in the drive room. "These Earthies are unbelievable! Can you imagine, can you *picture* it?" Astonishment rang in his disbelief at the proposal. "First they

hustle us into a metal prison and shoot us out here to die alone, they don't want any part of us, go away they say. Then when the trouble comes to them too big, they run after us, can you help us please, you dirty, ugly things, help us nice clean Earthies." He spun suddenly. "Get out of here! Get off this ship! We won't help you.

"You have your allotments and your quotas for each world—"

Curran broke in, "Yes, that's it. If the population goes down much more, they've been killing themselves, riots, it's terrible, then the balance will be changed, and our entire System culture will bend and fall and—"

Bedzyk cut him off, finishing what he had been saying, "—yes, you have your dirty little quotas, but you have no room for us. Well, we've got no room for you! Now get the hell off this ship. We don't want to help you!"

Curran leaped to his feet. "You can't send me away like this! You don't speak for all of them aboard. You can't treat a Terran emissary this way—" Bedzyk had him by the jumper, and had propelled him toward the closed companionway door before the Attaché knew quite what was happening. He hit the door and rebounded. As he stumbled back toward Bedzyk, the great-chested mutant snatched the briefcase from beside the control chair and slammed it into Curran's stomach. "Here! Here's your offer and your lousy demands, and get off this ship! We don't want any part of y—"

The door crashed open, and the Discards were there.

They filled the corridor, as far back as the angle where cross-passages ran off toward the saloon and galley. They shoved and nudged each other to get a view into the drive room; Samswope and Harmony Teat and Dresden were in the front, and from somewhere Samswope had produced an effectively deadly little rasp-pistol. He held it tightly, threateningly, and "Bedzyk felt flattered that they had come to his aid.

"You don't need that, Sam—Mr. Curran was just leav—"

Then he realized. The rasp was pointed not at Curran, but at him.

He stood frozen, one hand still clutching Curran's sleeve, as Curran bellied the briefcase to himself.

"Dresden overheard it all, Mr. Curran," Samswope said in a pathetically ingratiating tone. "*He* wants us to rot on this barge." He gestured at Bedzyk with his free hand as the dumb head nodded

certain agreement. "What offer can you make us, can we go home, Mr. Curran. . . .?" There was a whimpering and a pleading in Samswope's voice that Bedzyk had only *sensed* before.

He tried to break in, "Are you insane, Swope? Putty, that's all you are! Putty when you see a fake hope that you'll get off this ship! Can't you see they just want to *use* us? Can't you understand that?"

Samswope's face grew livid and he screamed, "Shut up! Just shut up and let Curran talk! We don't want to die on this ship. *You* may like it, you little tin god, but we hate it here! So shut up and let him talk!"

Curran spoke rapidly then: "If you allow us to send a medical detachment up here to use you as blood donors, I have the word of the System Central that you will all be allowed to land on Earth and we'll have a reservation for you so you can live some kind of normal lives again—"

"Hey, what's the matter with you?" Bedzyk again burst in, trying vainly to speak over the hubbub from the corridor. "Can't you see he's lying? They'll use us and then desert us again!"

Samswope growled menacingly, "If you don't shut up I'll kill you, Bedzyk!"

Bedzyk faltered into silence and watched the scene before him. They were melting. They were going to let this rotten turncoat Earthie blind them with false hopes.

"We've worked our allotments around so there is space for you, perhaps in the new green-valleys of South America or on the veldtland in Rhodesia. It will be wonderful, but we need your blood, we need your help."

"Don't trust him! Don't believe him, you can't believe an Earth-man!" Bedzyk shouted, stumbling forward to wrest the rasp-pistol from Samswope's grip.

Samswope fired point-blank. First the rasp of the power spurting from the muzzle of the tiny pistol filled the drive room, then the smell of burning flesh, and Bedzyk's eyes opened wide in pain. He screamed thinly, and staggered back against Curran. Curran stepped aside, and Bedzyk mewed in agony, and crumpled onto the deck. A huge hole had been seared through his huge chest. Huge chest, huge death, and he lay there with his eyes open, barely forming the words "don't . . . you can't, can't t-trust an Earth-mmm . . ." with his bloody lips. The last word formed and became a forever intaglio.

Curran's face had paled out till it was a blotch against the dark blue of his jumper. "Y-y-y . . ."

Samswope moved into the drive room and took Curran by the sleeve, almost where Bedzyk had held it. "You promise us we can land and be allowed to settle someplace on Earth?"

Curran nodded dumbly. Had they asked for Earth in its socket, he would have nodded agreement. Samswope still held the rasp.

"All right, then . . . get your med detachment up here, and get that blood. We want to go home, Mr. Curran, we want to go home more than anything!"

They led him to the lock. Behind him, Curran saw three mutants lifting the blasted body of Bedzyk, bearing it on their shoulders through the crowd. The body was borne out of sight down a cross-corridor, and Curran followed it out of sight with his eyes.

Beside him, Samswope said: "To the garbage lock. We go that way, Mr. Curran." His tones were hard and uncompromising. "We don't like going that way, Mr. Curran. We want to go home. You'll see to it, won't you, Mr. Curran?"

Curran again nodded dumbly, and entered the lock linking ships.

Ten hours later, the med detachment came up. The Discards were completely obedient and tremendously helpful.

It took nearly eleven months to inoculate the entire population of the Earth and the rest of the System—strictly as preventative caution dictated—and during that time no more Discards took their lives. Why should they? They were going home. Soon the tug-ships would come, and help jockey the big Discard vessel into orbit for the run to Earth. They were going home. There was room for them now, even in their condition. Spirits ran high, and laughter tinkled oddly down the passageway in the 'evenings.' There was even a wedding between Arkay (who was blind and had a bushy tail) and a pretty young thing the others called Daanae, for she could not speak herself. Without a mouth that was impossible. At the ceremony in the saloon, Samswope acted as minister, for the Discards had made him their leader in the same, silent way they had made Bedzyk the leader before him. Spirits ran high, and the constant knowledge that as soon as Earth had the Sickness under control they would be going home, kept them patient; eleven months.

Then one 'afternoon' the ship came.

Not the little tugs, as they had supposed, but a cargo ship nearly as big as their own home. Samswope rushed to synch in the locks, and when the red lights merged on the board, he locked the two together firmly, and scrambled back through the throng to be the first to greet the men who would deliver them.

When the lock sighed open, and they saw the first ten who had been thrust in, they knew the truth.

One had a head flat as a plate, with no eyes, and its mouth in its neck. Another had several hundred thousand slimy tenacles where arms should have been, and waddled on stumps that could never again be legs. Still another was brought in by a pair of huge empty-faced men, in a bowl. The bowl contained a yellow jelly, and swimming in the yellow jelly was the woman.

Then they knew. They were not going home. As lockful after lockful of more Discards came through, to swell their ranks even more, they knew these were the last of the tainted ones from Earth. The last ones who had been stricken by the Sickness—who had changed before the serum could save them. These were the last, and now the Earth was clean.

Samswope watched them trail in, some dragging themselves on appendageless torsos, others in baskets, still others with one arm growing from a chest, or hair that was blue and fungus growing out all over the body. He watched them and knew the man he had killed had been correct. For among the crowd he glimpsed a bare-chested Discard with huge sores on his body. Curran.

And as the cargo ship unlocked and swept back to Earth—with the silent warning *Don't follow us, don't try to land, there's no room for you here*—Samswope could hear Bedzyk's hysterical tones in his head:

Don't trust them! There is room for us anywhere! Don't trust them!

You can't trust an Earthman!

Samswope started walking slowly toward the galley, knowing he would need someone to seal the garbage lock after him. But it didn't matter who it was. There were more than enough Discards aboard now.

Pain. The pain of being obsolete. I go down to Santa Monica sometimes, and walk along through the oceanside park that forms the outermost edge of California. There, at the shore of the Pacific, like flotsam washed up by America, with no place to go, are the old people. Their time has gone, their eyes look out across the water for another beginning, but they have come to the final moments. They sit in the vanilla sunshine and they dream of yesterday. Kind old people, for the most part. They talk to each other, they talk to themselves, and they wonder where it all went.

I stop and sit on the benches and talk to them sometimes. Not often; it makes me think of endings rather than continuations or new beginnings. They're sad, but they have a nobility that cannot be ignored. They're passed-over, obsolescent, but they still run well and they have good minutes in them. Their pain is a terrible thing because it cries to be given the chance to work those arthritic fingers at something meaningful, to work those brain cells at something challenging.

This story is about someone in the process of being passed-over, being made obsolete. He fights. I would fight. Some of the old people in Santa Monica fight. Do we ever win? Against the shadow that inevitably falls, no.

Against the time between now and the shadow's arrival, yes, certainly.

That's the message in

Wanted in Surgery

Chapter One

A man named Tibor Károly Zsebok who had escaped from the People's Hungarian Protectorate to the North American Continent's

sanctuary late in the year 2087—invented it. While working as a bonded technician for the Orrin Tool and Tree Conglomerate—on a design to create a robot capable of fine watch repairs—he discovered the factor of multiple choice. He was able to apply this concept to the cellulose-plasteel brain of his watch repair robot's pilot model, and came up with the startling "physician mechanical." Infinitely more intricate than a mere robot-mechanical, yet far simpler than a human brain, it was capable—after proper conditioning—of the most delicate of operations. Further, the "phymech," as it was tagged soon after, was capable of infallible diagnosis, involving anything organic.

The mind was still locked to the powers of the metal physician, but for the ills of the body there was no more capable administrator.

Zsebok died several weeks after his pilot model had been demonstrated at a special closed session of the House of Congress; from a coronary thrombosis. But his death was more of a propelling factor to widespread recognition of the phymech than his life could ever have been.

The House of Congress appointed a committee of fact-finders, from the firm of Data, Unlimited—who had successfully completed the Orinoco Basin Probe—and compared their three-month findings with the current Histophysiology appropriations allocated to the Secretary of Medicine.

They found phymechs could be operated in all the socialized hospitals of the Continent, for far less than was being spent on Doctor's salaries.

After all, a Doctor continued to *need.*

A phymech absorbed one half pint of liquified radiol every three years, and an occasional lubrication, to insure proper functioning.

So the government passed a law. The Hippocratic Law of 2088, which said, in essence:

"All ministrations shall henceforth be confined to government-sponsored hospitals; emergency cases necessitating attendance outside said institutions shall be handled *only,* repeat *only,* by registered Physician Mechanicals issuing from registered hospital pools. Any irregularities or deviations from this procedure shall be handled as cases outside the law, and illegal attendance by non-Mechanical Physicians shall be severely punishable by cancellation of practicing license and/or fine and imprisonment . . ."

Johns Hopkins was the first to be de-franchised. Then the Columbia School of Medicine, and the other colleges followed shortly thereafter.

A few specialist schools were maintained for a time; but it became increasingly apparent after the first three years of phymech operation that even the specialists were slow compared to the robot doctors. So even they passed away. Doctors who had been licensed before the innovations the phymechs brought, were maintained at slashed salaries, and were reduced to assistants, interns.

They were, however, given a few annuities, which boiled down eventually to 1) a franking privilege so postage was unnecessary on their letters, 2) a small annual dole, 3) subscriptions to current medical journals (now filled more with electronic data pertinent to phymechs than surgical techniques) and 4) honorary titles. Doctors in title only.

There was dissatisfaction.

In 2091 Kohlbenschlagg, the greatest brain surgeon of them all, died. He passed away on a quiet October morning, with the climate dome purring ever so faintly above the city, and the distant scream of the transport sphincter opening to allow the Earth-Mars 8:00 liner through. A quiet, drawn-faced man with a great talent in slim fingers. He died in his sleep, and the papers clacked out of the homeslots, with heavy black headlines across yellow plastic sheets. But not about Kohlbenschlagg. *He* was yesterday's news. The headline was about the total automation changeover in the Ford-Chrysler plants.

On page one hundred and eighteen there was a five line obituary that labeled him "a pre-phymech surgeon of some skill." It also reported he had died of acute alcoholism.

It was not specifically true.

His death was caused by a composite. Acute alcoholism.

And a broken heart.

He died alone, but he was remembered. By the men and women who, like Kohlbenschlagg, had spent their early lives in dedication to the staff and the lion's head, the hand and eagle's eye. By men and women who could not adjust. The small legion of men and women who still walked the antiseptic corridors of the hospitals.

Men like Stuart Bergman, M.D.

This is his story.

Chapter Two

The main operation theater of Memorial was constructed along standard lines. The observation bubble was set high on one wall, curving large and down, with a separating section allowing two viewing stands. The operating stage, on a telescoping base that raised or lowered it for easier observation from the bubble, squatted in the center of the room. There were no operating lamps in the ceiling, as in old-style hospitals, for the phymechs had their powerful eterna light mounted atop their heads, serving their needs more accurately than any outside light source could have.

Beyond the stage, there were anaesthetic spheres clipped to the walls—in five-container groups—where they could be easily reached should the phymech's personal supply run dry, and a rapidroll belt running from a digital supply machine beside the operating table to the see-through selector cabinets that stood by the exits.

That was all; everything that was needed.

Even the spheres and extra cabinets might have been dispensed with; but somehow, they had been maintained, just slightly limiting the phymech's abilities. As though to reassure some unnamed person that they needed help. Even if it was mechanical help to help the mechanicals.

The three phymechs were performing the operation directly beneath the bubble when Bergman came in. The bubble was dark, but he could see Murray Thomas's craggy features set against the light of the operating stage. The illumination had been a concession to the human observers, for with their own eternalights, the phymechs could work in a total blackout, during a power failure.

Bergman held the crumpled news sheet in his hand, page one hundred and eighteen showing, and stared at the scene below him.

Naturally, it *would* be a brain operation today! The one day it should be a mere goiter job, or a plantar stripping, if just to keep him steady; but no, it *had* to be a brain job, with the phymechs thirty telescoping, snakelike appendages extruded and snicking into the patient.

Bergman swallowed hard, and made his way down the slope of aisle to the empty seat beside Thomas. He was a dark man, with an almost unnaturally spadelike face. High, prominent cheekbones, giving him a gaunt look, and veins that stood out along the temples. His nose was thin, and humped where it had been broken years before.

His eyes were deep and darkest blue, so they appeared black. His hair was thin, roughly combed; back from the forehead without affectation or wave, just combed, because he had to keep the hair from his eyes.

He slumped into the seat, keeping his eyes off the operation below, keeping the face of Murray Thomas in his sight, with the light from below playing up across the round, unflustered features. He held out the news sheet, touching Thomas's arm with it; for the first time, as the young Doctor started, Thomas realized Bergman was there. He turned slowly, and his placid stare met the wild look of Bergman; a question began to form, but Thomas cast a glance behind him, toward the top of the seat tier, at the silent dark bulk of the Head Resident. He put a hand on Bergman's arm, and then he saw the news sheet.

Bergman offered it another inch, and Thomas took it. He opened it out, turning it below the level of the seats, trying to catch the light from below. He roamed the page for a moment, then his hands crumpled tight on the plastic. He saw the five line filler.

Kohlbenschlagg was dead.

He turned to Bergman, and his eyes held infinite sorrow. He mouthed with his lips the words, "I'm sorry, Stuart," but they died midway between them.

He stared at Bergman's face for a moment, knowing he could do nothing for the man now. Kohlbenschlagg had been Stuart Bergman's teacher, his friend, more a father to him than the father Bergman had run away from in his youth. Now Bergman was totally alone . . . for his wife Thelma was no help in this situation . . . her constitution could not cope with a case of inner disintegration.

With difficulty he turned back to the operation, feeling an overwhelming desire to take Bergman's hand, to help ease away the sorrow he knew coursed through the man; but the sorrow was a personal thing, and he was cut off from the tense man beside him.

Bergman watched the operation now. There was nothing else to do. He had spent ten years of his life training to be a physician, and

now he was sitting watching faceless blocks of metal do those ten years better than he ever could.

Murray Thomas was abruptly aware of heavy breathing beside him. He did not turn his head. He had seen Bergman getting nearer and nearer the cracking point for weeks now: ever since the phymechs had been completely installed, and the human doctors had been relegated to assistants, interns, instrument-carriers. He feverishly hoped this was not the moment Bergman would choose to fall apart.

The phymechs below were proceeding with the delicate operation. One of the telescoping, snakelike tentacles of one phymech had a wafer-thin circular saw on it, and as Thomas watched, the saw sliced down, and they could hear the buzz of steel meeting skull.

"God in *heaven!* Stop it, stop it, stop it . . .!"

Thomas was an instant too late. Bergman was up out of his seat, down the aisle, and banging his fists against the clear plasteel of the observation bubble, before he could be stopped.

It produced a feeling of utter hysteria in the bubble, as though all of them wanted to scream, had been holding it back, and now were struggling with the sounds, not to join in. Bergman battered himself up against the clearness of the bubble, mumbling, screaming, his face a riot of pain and horror.

"Not even a . . . a . . . decent *death!*" he was screaming. "He lies down there, and rotten dirty metal *things* . . . things, God dammit! *Things* rip up his patients! Oh, God, where is the way, where, where, where . . ."

Then the three interns erupted from the door at the top rear of the bubble, and ran down the aisle. In an instant they had Bergman by the shoulders, the arms, the neck, and were dragging him back up the aisle.

Calkins, the Head Resident, yelled after them, "Take him to my office for observation, I'll be right there."

Murray Thomas watched his friend disappear in the darkness toward the rectangle of light in the rear wall. Then he was gone, and Thomas heard Calkins say: "Ignore that outburst, Doctors, there is always someone who gets squeamish at the sight of a well-performed operation."

Then he was gone, off to examine Bergman.

And Murray Thomas felt a brassy, bitter taste on his tongue; Bergman afraid of blood, the sight of an operation? Not likely. He had seen Stuart Bergman work many times—not Stuart Bergman; the operating room was home to Bergman. No, it hadn't been that.

Then it was that Thomas realized: the incident had completely shattered the mood and attention of the men in the bubble. *They* were incapable of watching the phymechs any further today—but the phymechs . . .

. . . they were undisturbed, unseeing, uncaring: calmly, coolly working, taking off the top of the patients' skull.

Thomas felt desperately ill.

Chapter Three

"Honest to God, I tell you, Murray, I can't take it much longer!"

Bergman was still shaking from the examination in Calkins's offices. His hands were prominent with blue veins, and they trembled ever so slightly across the formatop of the table. The dim sounds of the Medical Center filtered to them in the hush-booth. Bergman ran a hand through his hair. "Every time I see one of those . . ." he paused, hesistated, then did not use the word. Murray Thomas knew the word, had it come forth, would have been *monster*. Bergman went on, a blank space in his sentence, "Every time I see one of them picking around inside one of my patients, with those metal tips, I—I get sick to my stomach! It's all I can do to keep from ripping out its goddamed wiring!" His face was deathly pale, yet somehow unnaturally flushed.

He quivered as he spoke. And quivered again.

Dr. Murray Thomas put out a hand placatingly. "Now take it easy, Stu. You keep getting yourself all hot over this thing and if it doesn't break you—which it damned well easily could—they'll revoke your license, bar you from practicing." He looked across at Bergman, and blinked assuringly, as if to keynote his warning.

Bergman muttered with surliness, "Fine lot of practicing I do now. Or you, for that matter."

Thomas tapped a finger on the table. It caused the multi-colored bits of plastic beneath the formatop to jiggle, casting pinpoints of light

across Bergman's strained features. "And besides, Stu, you have no *logical,* scientific reason for hating the phymechs."

Bergman stared back angrily. "Science doesn't come into it, and you know it. This is from the gut, Murray, not the brain!"

"Look, Stu, they're infallible; they're safer and they can do a job quicker with less mess than even a—a Kohlbenschlagg. Right?"

Bergman nodded reluctantly, but there was a dangerous edge to his expression. "But at least Kohlbenschlagg, even with those thick-lensed glasses, was *human.* It wasn't like having a piece of—of—well, a piece of *stovepipe* rummaging around in a patient's stomach."

He shook his head sadly in remembrance. "Old Fritz couldn't take it. That's what killed him. Those damned machines. Playing intern to a phymech was too much for him. Oh *hell! You* know what a grand heart that old man had, Murray. Fifty years in medicine and then to be barely *allowed* to hold sponge for a lousy tick-tock . . . and what was worse, knowing the tick-tock could hold the sponge more firmly with one of its pincers. That's what killed Old Fritz."

Bergman added softly, staring at his shaking hands, "And at that . . . *he's* the lucky one."

And then: "We're the damned of our culture, Murray; the kept men of medicine."

Thomas looked up startled, then annoyed. "Oh, for Christ's sake, Stuart, stop being melodramatic. Nothing of the sort. If a better scalpel comes along, do you refuse to discard the old issue because you've used it so long? Don't be an ass."

"*But we're not scalpels. We're men! We're doctors!*" He was on his feet suddenly, as though the conversation had been physically building in him, forcing an explosion. The two whiskey glasses slipped and dumped as his thighs banged the table in rising. Bergman's voice was raised, and his temples throbbed, yet he was not screaming; even so, the words came out louder than any scream.

"For God's sake, Stu, *sit down!*" Thomas looked apprehensively around the Medical Center Lounge. "If the Head Resident should walk in, we'd *both* get our throats cut. Sit *down,* will you already!"

Bergman slumped slowly back onto the form seat. It depressed and flowed around him caressingly, and he squirmed in agony, as though it were strangling him. Even after he was fully seated, his shoulders

continued rounding; his eyes were wild. Beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead, his upper lip.

Thomas leaned forward, a frown creasing his mouth. "Take hold, Stu. Don't let a thing like this ruin you. Better men than us have felt this way about it, but you can't stop progress. And losing your head, doing something crazy like that exhibition at the operation yesterday, won't do any of us any good. It's all we can do to maintain what rights we have left. It's a bad break for us, Stu, but it's good for the whole rest of the human race, and dammit man, they come before us. It's as simple as that."

He drew a handkerchief from his breast-pouch and mopped at the spreading twin pools of liquor, covertly watching Bergman from behind lowered lashes.

The sudden blare of a juke brought Bergman's head up, his nostrils flaring. When he realized what it was, he subsided, the lights vanishing from his eyes.

He rested his head in his hand, rubbing slowly up and down the length of his nose. "How did it all start, Murray? I mean, all this?" He looked at the roaring juke that nearly drowned out conversation despite the hush-booth . . . the bar with its mechanical drink-interpolater—remarkable mnemonic circuits capable of mixing ten thousand different liquors flawlessly—and intoxication-estimater . . . the fully-mechanized hospital rearing huge outside the plasteel-fonted bar . . . robot physicians glimpsed occasionally passing before a lighted window.

Windows showing light only because the human patients and fallible doctors needed it. The robots needed no light; they needed no fame, and no desire to help mankind. All they needed was their power-pack and an occasional oiling. In return for which they saved mankind.

Bergman's mind tossed the bitter irony about like a dog with a foul rag in its mouth.

Murray Thomas sighed softly, considered Bergman's question. He shook his head. "I don't know, Stu." The words paced themselves, emerging slowly, reluctantly. "Perhaps it was the automatic pilot, or the tactical computers they used in the Third War, or maybe even farther back than that; maybe it was as far back as electric sewing

machines, and hydramatic shift cars and self-serve elevators. It was machines, and they worked better than humans. That was it, pure and simple. A hunk of metal is nine times out of ten better than a fallible man."

Thomas considered what he had said, added definitely, "I'll take that back: *ten* times out of ten. There's nothing a cybernetics man can't build into one of those things now. It was inevitable they'd get around to taking human lives out of the hands of mere men." He looked embarrassed for an instant at the length and tone of his reply, then sighed again and downed the last traces of his drink, running his tongue absently around the lip of the glass, tasting the dried liquid there.

Bergman's intensity seemed to pulse, grow stronger. He was obviously trying to find an answer to the problem of himself, within himself. He hunched further over, looking into his friend's face earnestly, almost boyishly, "But—but it doesn't seem *right*, somehow. We've always depended on doctors—human doctors—to care for the sick and dying. It was a constant, Murray. A something you could depend on. In time of war a doctor was inviolate.

"In times of need—I know it sounds maudlin, Murray—for God's sake, in times of need a doctor was priest and father and teacher and patriot, and . . . and . . ."

He made futile motions with his hands, as though pleading the words to appear from the air. Then he continued in a stronger voice, from a memory ground into his mind:

" 'I will keep pure and holy both my life and my art. In whatsoever houses I enter, I will enter to help the sick, and I will abstain from all intentional wrongdoing and harm. And whatsoever I shall see or hear in the course of my profession in my intercourse with men, if it be what should not be published abroad, I will never divulge, holding such things to be holy secrets.' "

Thomas's eyebrows rose slightly as his lips quirked in an unconscious smile. He had known Bergman would resort to the Oath eventually. Dedicated wasn't enough of a word to describe Stuart Bergman, it seemed. He was right, it *was* maudlin, and still . . .

Bergman continued. "What good is it all now? They've only had the phymechs a few years now, only a few, and they have them in solidly

. . . even though there are things about them they aren't sure about. So what good were all the years in school, in study, in tradition? We can't even go into the homes any more."

His face seemed to grow more haggard under the indirect gleam of the glaze lights in the Lounge; his hair seemed grayer than a moment before; the lines of his face were deeper. He swallowed nervously, ran a finger through the faint coating of wet left by the spilled drinks. "What kind of a practice is that? To carry slop-buckets? To be allowed to watch as the robots cut and sew our patients? To be kept behind glass at the big operations?

"To see the red lights flash on the hot board and know a mobilized monster is rolling faster than an ambulance to the scene? Is that what you're telling me I have to adjust to? Are you, Murray? Don't expect me to be as calm about it as you!"

"And most degrading of all," he added, as if to solidify his arguments, "to have them throw us a miserable appendectomy or stomach-pump job once a week. Like scraps from the table . . . and watch us while we do it! What *are* we, dogs? To be treated like pets? I tell you I'm going crazy, Murray! I go home at night and find myself even cutting my steak as though it were heart tissue. Anything, anything at all, just to remind myself that I was trained for surgery. My God! When I think of all the years, all the sweat, all the gutting and starving, just to come to this! Murray, where's it going to end?"

He was on the verge of another scene like the one in the operating room observation bubble.

Whatever had happened when the Head Resident had examined Bergman—and it *seemed* to have been cleared up, for Bergman was still scheduled on the boards as phymech assistant, though his weekly operation had been set ahead three days—it wouldn't do to let it flare up again.

And Murray Thomas knew things were boiling inside his ex-schoolmate; he had no idea how long it would be before the lid blew off, ruining Bergman permanently.

"Calm down, Stuart," he said. "Let me dial you another drink . . ."

"*Don't touch that goddam mechanical thing!*" he roared, striking Thomas's hand from the interpolater dial.

He gasped raggedly. "There are *some* things a machine *can't* do.

Machines brush my teeth in the morning, and they cook my food, and they lull me to sleep, but there must be *something* they can't do better than a human . . . otherwise why did God create humans? To be waited on by tin cans? I don't know what they are, but I swear there must be some abilities a human possesses that a robot doesn't. There must be something that makes a man more valuable than a whirring, clanking chunk of tin!" He stopped, out of breath. It was then that Calkins, the Head Resident, stepped around the panel separating the booths from the bar.

The Head Resident stood there silently, watching for a moment, like a hound on point. He fingered the lapel on his sport-jumper absently. "Getting a bit noisy, aren't you, Dr. Bergman?"

Stuart Bergman's face was alive with fear. His eyes lowered to his hands; entwined like serpents, seeking sanctuary in each other, white with the pressure of his clasping, his fingers writhed. "I—I was just, just, airing a few views . . . that's all, Dr. Calkins."

"Rather nasty views, I must say, Dr. Bergman. Might be construed as dissatisfaction with the way I'm handling things at Memorial. You wouldn't want anyone to think that, would you, Dr. Bergman?" His words had taken on the tone of command, of steel imbedded in rock.

Bergman shook his head quickly, slightly, nervously. "No. No, I didn't mean that at all, Dr. Calkins. I was just—well, you know. I thought perhaps if we physicians had a few more operations, a few more difficult . . ."

"Don't you think the phymechs are quite capable of handling any such, Dr. Bergman?"

There was an air of expectancy in his voice . . . waiting for Bergman to say the wrong thing. That's what you'd like, wouldn't you, Calkins? That's what you want! His thoughts spun sidewise, madly.

"I suppose so . . . yes, I know they are. It was, well, it's difficult to remember I'm a Doctor, not doing any work for so long and all and . . ."

"That's about enough, Bergman!" snapped Calkins. "The government subsidized the phymechs, and they use taxpayers' money to keep them serviced and saving lives. They have a finer record than *any* human . . ."

Bergman broke in sharply. "But they haven't been fully tested or . . ."

Calkins stared him into silence, replied, "If you want to remain on the payroll, remain in the hospital, Dr. Bergman, even as an Assistant, you'd better tone down and watch yourself, Bergman. We have our eyes on you."

"But I . . ."

"I said that's enough, Bergman!" Turning to Murray Thomas he added violently, "And I'd watch who I keep company with, Thomas, if I were you. That's all. Good evening." He strode off lightly, almost jauntily, arrogance in each step, leaving Bergman huddled in a corner of the booth, staring wild-eyed at his hands.

"Rotten lousy appointee!" snarled Thomas softly. "If it weren't for his connections with the Secretary of Medicine he'd be in the same boat with us. The lousy bastard."

"I—I guess I'd better be getting home," mumbled Bergman, sliding out of the booth. A sudden blast from the juke shivered him, and he regained his focus on Thomas with difficulty. "Thelma's probably waiting dinner for me.

"Thanks . . . thanks for having a drink with me, Murray. I'll see you at washup tomorrow." He ran a finger down the front of his jumper, sealing the suit; he pulled up his collar, sealing the suit to the neck.

A fine spray of rain—scheduled for this time by Weatherex—was dotting the huge transparent front of the lounge, and Bergman stared at it, engrossed for an instant, as though seeing something deeper in the rain.

He drew a handful of octagonal plastic chits from his pouch, dropped them into the pay slot on his side of the table, and started away. The machine registered an overpayment, but he did not bother to collect the surplus coins.

He paused, turned for a moment. Then, "Thanks . . . Murray . . ." and he was gone into the rain.

Poor slob, thought Dr. Murray Thomas, an ache beginning to build within him for things he could not name. *Just can't adjust.* He knew he couldn't hold it, but he dialed another drink. He regretted it while doing it, but that ache had to be avoided at all costs. The drink was a double.

Chapter Four

That night was hell. Hell with the torture of memories past and present. He knew he had been acting like a fool, that he was just another stupid man who could not accept what was to be.

But there was more, and it pervaded his thoughts, his dreams. He had been a coward in front of Calins. He felt strongly—God! More than merely strongly!—yet he had backed down. After making an ass of himself at the operation, the day of Old Fritz Kohlenschlagg's death, he had backed down. He had run away from his problem.

Now, all the years that he had lived by the Oath were wasted. His life seemed to be a failure. He had struggled desperately to get where he was, and now that he was there . . . he was nowhere. He had run away.

It was the first time since he had been very young that he had felt that way. He lay on the bed, the formkling sheet rumpled half on the floor at the foot of the bed. Thelma lay silent in the other hush-bunk, the blanker keeping her snores from disturbing him. And the memories slid by slowly.

He could still remember the time a friend had fallen into a cistern near a deserted house—before the dome—and fear had prevented his descending to save his playmate. The boy had drowned, and ten-year-old Stuart Bergman had fostered a guilt of that failure he had carried ever since. It had, he sometimes thought, been one of the factors that had contributed to his decision to become a doctor.

Now again, years later, he was helpless and trembling in the spider's mesh of a situation in which he could not move to do what he knew was right. He did not know *why* he was so set against them—Murray's analogy of the scalpel was perfectly valid—but something sensed but unnamed in his guts told him he was right. This was unnatural, damnable, that humans were worked over by machines.

It somehow—irrationally—seemed a plan of the Devil. He had heard people call the machines the Devil's Playthings. Perhaps they were right. He lay on his bed, sweating.

Feeling incomplete, feeling filthy, feeling contamined by his own inadequacy, and his cowardice before Calkins.

He screwed his face up in agony, in self-castigation, shutting his eyes tight, till the nerves running through his temples throbbed.

Then he placed the blame where it really belonged.

Why was he suffering? Why was his once-full life so suddenly empty and framed by worthlessness? Fear. Fear of what? Why was he afraid? Because the Phymechs had taken over.

Again. The same answer. And in his mind, his purpose resolved, solidified.

He had to get the Phymechs discredited; had to find some reason for them to be thrown out. But how? How?

They *were* better. In all ways. Weren't they?

Three days later, as he Assisted a phymech on his scheduled Operating Assignment, the answer came to Bergman as horribly as he might have wished. It came in the form of a practical demonstration, and he was never to forget it.

The patient had been involved in a thresher accident on one of the group-farms. The sucker-mouth thresher had whipped him off his feet, and dragged him in, feet first. He had saved himself from being completely chewed to bits by placing his hands around the mouth of the thresher, and others had rushed in to drag him free before his grip loosened.

He had fainted from pain, and luckily, for the sucker-mouth had ground off both his legs just below the knees. When they wheeled him before Bergman—with his oxygen-mask and tube in hand—and the phymech—with instruments already clasped in nine of its thirteen magnetic tips—the man was covered with a sheet.

Bergman's transparent face-mask quivered as he drew back the sheet, exposing the man. They had bound up the stumps, and cauter-halted the bleeding . . . but the patient was as badly off as Bergman had ever seen an injured man.

It will be close all the way. Thank God, in this case, the phymech is fast and efficient. No human could save this one in time.

So intent was he on watching the phymech's technique, so engrossed was he at the snicker and gleam of the instruments being whipped from their cubicles in the phymech's storage-bin chest, he failed to adjust the anaesthesia-cone properly. Bergman watched the

intricate play of the phymech's tentacles, as they telescoped out and back from the small holes in each shoulder-globe. He watched the tortured flesh being stripped back to allow free play for the sutures. The faint hiss of the imperfectly-fitted cone reached him too late.

The patient sat up, suddenly.

Straight up, with hands rigid to the table. His eyes opened, and he stared down at the ripped and bloodied stumps where his legs had been.

His screams echoed back from the operating room walls.

"Oh, I wanna die, I wanna die, I wanna die . . ." Over and over his hysterical screams beat at Bergman's consciousness. The phymech automatically moved to leach off the rising panic in the patient, but it was too late. The patient fainted, and almost instantly the cardio showed a dip. The spark was going out.

The phymech ignored it; there was nothing it could do about it. Organically the man was being handled efficiently. The trouble was emotional . . . where the phymech never went.

Bergman stared in horror. The man was dying . . . right out from under the tentacles. *Why doesn't the thing try to help the man? Why doesn't he soothe him, let him know it'll be all right? He's dying, because he's in shock . . . he doesn't want to live! Just a word would do . . .*

Bergman's thoughts whipped themselves into a frenzy, but the phymech continued operating, calmly, hurriedly, but with the patient failing rapidly.

Bergman started forward, intent to reach the patent. The injured man had looked up and seen himself amputated bloodily just beneath the knees, and worse, had seen the faceless metal entity working over him; at that crucial moment when any little thing could sway the desire to live, the man had seen no human with whom he could identify . . . merely a rounded and planed block of metal. He wanted to die.

Bergman reached out to touch the patient. Without ceasing its activities, the phymech extruded a chamois-mitt tentacle, and removed Bergman's hand. The hollow inflectionless voice of the robot darted from its throat-speaker:

"No interference please. This is against the rules."

Bergman drew back, horror stamped across his fine features, his

skin literally crawling, from the touch of the robot, and from the sight of the phymech operating steadily . . . on a corpse.

The man had lost the spark.

The operation was a success, as they had often quipped, but the patient was dead. Bergman felt nausea grip him with sodden fingers, and he doubled over turning quickly toward the wall. He stared up at the empty observation bubble, thankful this was a standard, routine operation and no viewers sat behind the clearness up there. He leaned against the feeder-trough of the instrument cabinets, and vomited across the sparkling grey plasteel tiles. A servomeck skittered free of its cubicle and cleaned away the mess immediately.

It only heightened his sickness.

Machines cleaning up for machines.

He didn't bother finishing as Assistant on the phymech's grisly operation. It would do no good; and besides, the phymech didn't need any help.

It wasn't human.

Bergman didn't show up at Memorial for a week; there was a polite inquiry from Scheduling, but when Thelma told them he was "just under the weather" they replied "well, the robot doesn't really need him anyhow" and that was that. Stuart Bergman's wife was worried, however.

Her husband lay curled on the bed, face to the wall, and murmured the merest murmurs to her questions. It was really as though he had something on his mind.

(Well, if he *did*, why didn't he *say* something! There just is no understanding that man. Oh well, no time to worry over that now . . . Francine and Sally are getting up the electro-mah jongg game at Sally's today. Dear, can you punch up some lunch for yourself? Well, really! Not even an answer, just that mumble. Oh well, I'd better hurry . . .)

Bergman *did* have something on his mind. He had seen a terrifying and a gut-wrenching thing. He had seen the robot fail. Miserably fail. That was the sum of it. For the first time since he had been unconsciously introduced to the concept of phymech infallibility, he had seen it as a lie. The phymech was *not* perfect. The man had died under Bergman's eyes. Now Stuart Bergman had to reason why . . .

and whether it had happened before . . . whether it would happen again . . . what it meant . . . and what it meant to him, as well as the profession, as well as the world.

The phymech had *known* the man was in panic; the robot had instantly lowered the adrenalin count . . . but it had been more than that. Bergman had handled cases like that in the past, where improperly-delivered anaesthesis had allowed a patient to become conscious and see himself split open. But in such cases he had said a few reassuring words, had run a hand over the man's forehead, his eyes, and strangely enough, that bit of bedside manner had been delivered in just such a proper way that the patient sank back peacefully into sleep.

But the robot had done nothing.

It had ministered to the body, while the mind shattered. Bergman had known, even as the man had seen his bloody stumps, that the operation would fail.

Why had it happened? Was this the first time a man had died under the tentacles of a Phymech, and if the answer was no . . . why hadn't he heard of it? When he stopped to consider, lost still in that horror maelstrom of memory and pain, he realized it was because the Phymechs were still "Undergoing Observation." But while that went on—so sure were the manufacturers, and the officials of the Department of Medicine, that the Phymechs were perfect—lives were being lost in the one way they could not be charged to the robots.

An intangible factor was involved.

It had been such a simple thing. Just to tell the man, "You'll be all right, fellow, take it easy. We'll have you out of here good as new in a little while . . . just settle back and get some sleep . . . and let me get my job done; we've got to work together, you know . . ."

That was all, just that much, and the life that had been in that mangled body would not have been lost. But the robot had stood there ticking, efficiently repairing tissue.

While the patient died in hopelessness and terror.

Then Bergman realized what it was a human had, a robot did not. He realized what it was a human could do that a robot could not. And it was so simple, so damnably simple, he wanted to cry. It was the human factor. They could *never* make a robot physician that was

perfect, because a robot could not understand the psychology of the human mind.

Bergman put it into simple terms . . .

The Phymechs just didn't have a bedside manner!

Chapter Five

Paths to destruction.

So many paths. So many answers. So many solutions, and which of them was the right one? Were any of them the right ones? Bergman had known he must find out, had known he must solve this problem by his own hand, for perhaps no one else's hand would turn to the problem . . . until it was too late.

Each day that passed meant another life had passed.

And the thought cursed Bergman more than any personal danger. He had to try something; in his desperation, he came up with a plan of desperation.

He would kill one of his patients . . .

Once every two weeks, a human was assigned his own operation. True, he was more supervised than assisted by the Phymech on duty, and the case was usually only an appendectomy or simple tonsillectomy . . . but it *was* an operation. And Lord knew the surgeons were grateful for any bone thrown them.

This was Bergman's day.

He had been dreading it for a week, thinking about it for a week, knowing what he must do for a week. But it had to be done. He didn't know what would happen to him, but it didn't really matter what was going on in their hospitals . . .

But if anything was to be done, it would have to be done boldly, swiftly, sensationally. And now. Something as awful as this couldn't wait much longer: the papers had been running articles about the Secretary of Medicine's *new* Phymech Proposal. That would have been the end. It would have to be now. Right now, while the issue was important.

He walked into the operating room.

A standard simple operation. No one in the bubble.

The phymech assistant stood silently waiting by the feeder trough.

As Bergman walked across the empty room, the cubicle split open across the way, and a rolling phymech with a tabletop—on which was the patient—hurried to the operating table. The machine lowered the tabletop to the operating slab, and bolted it down quickly. Then it rolled away.

Bergman stared at the patient, and for a minute his resolve left him. She was a thin young girl with laugh-lines in her face that could never be erased . . . except by death.

Up till a moment ago Bergman had known he would do it, but now . . . Now he had to see who he was going to do this thing to, and it made his stomach feel diseased in him, his breath filled with the decay of foul death. He couldn't do it.

The girl looked up at him, and smiled with light blue eyes, and somehow Bergman's thoughts centered on his wife Thelma, who was nothing like this sweet, frail child. Thelma, whose insensitivity had begun in his life as humorous, and decayed through the barren years of their marriage till it was now a millstone he wore silently. Bergman knew he couldn't do what had to be done. Not to this girl.

The phymech applied the anaesthesia cone from behind the girl's head. She caught one quick flash of tentacled metal, her eyes widened with blueness, and then she was asleep. When she awoke, her appendix would be removed.

Bergman felt a wrenching inside him. This was the time. With Calkins so suspicious of him, with the phymechs getting stronger every day, this might be the last chance.

He prayed to God silently for a moment, then began the operation. Bergman carefully made a longitudinal incision in the right lower quadrant of the girl's abdomen, about four inches long. As he spread the wound, he saw this would be just an ordinary job. No peritonitis . . . they had gotten the girl in quickly, and it hadn't ruptured. This would be a simple job, eight or nine minutes at the longest.

Carefully, Bergman delivered the appendix into the wound. Then he securely tied it at the base, and feeling the tension of what was to come building in him, cut it across and removed it.

He began to close the abdominal walls tightly.

Then he asked God for forgiveness, and did what had to be done. It was not going to be such a simple operation, after all.

The scalpel was an electro-blade—thin as a whisper—and as he

brought it toward the flesh, his plan ran through his mind. The spin of a bullet, the passage of a silver fish through quicksilver, the flick of a thought, but it was all there, in totality, completeness and madness . . .

He would sever an artery, the robot would sense what was being done, and would shoulder in to repair the damage. Bergman would slash another vein, and the robot would work at two jobs. He would slash again, and again, and yet again, till finally the robot would overload, and freeze. Then Bergman would overturn the table, the girl would be dead, there would be an inquiry and a trial, and he would be able to blame the robot for the death . . . and tell his story . . . make them check it . . . make them stop using Phymechs till the problem had been solved.

All that as the electro-blade moved in his hand.

Then the eyes of the girl fastened to his own, closed for a moment to consider what he was doing. In the darkness of his mind, he saw those eyes and knew finally:

What good was it to win his point, if he lost his soul?

The electro-blade clattered to the floor.

He stood there unmoving, as the Phymech rolled near-silently beside him, and completed the routine closure.

He turned away, and left the operating room quickly.

He left the hospital shortly after, feeling failure huge in his throat. He had had his opportunity, and had not been brave enough to take it. But was that it? Was it another edge of that inner cowardice he had shown before? Or was it that he realized *nothing* could be worth the taking of an innocent girl's life? Ethics, soft-heartedness, what? His mind was a turmoil.

The night closed down stark and murmuring around Bergman. He stepped from the light blotch of the lobby, and the rain misted down over him, shutting him away from life and man and everything but the dark wool of his inner thoughts. It had been raining like this the night Calkins had intimidated him. Was it always to rain on him, throughout his days?

Only the occasional whirr of a heater ploughing invisibly across the sky overhead broke the steady machine murmur of the city. He crossed the silent street quickly.

The square block of darkness that was Memorial was dotted with the faint rectangles of windows. Lighted windows. The hollow laughter of bitterness bubbled up from his belly as he saw the lights. Concessions to Man . . . always concessions by the Almighty God of the Machine.

Inside Bergman's mind, something was fighting to be free. He was finished now, he knew that. He had had the chance, but it had been the wrong chance. It could never be right if it started from something like that girl's death. He knew that, too . . . finally. But what was there to do:

And the answer came back hollowly: *Nothing.*

Behind him, where he could not see it, a movement of metal in the shadows.

Bergman walked in shadows, also. Thoughts that were shadows. Thoughts that led him only to bleak futility and despair. The Zsebok Mechanical Physicians. *Phymechs.*

The word exploded in his head like a Roman candle, spitting sparks into his nerve ends. He never wanted to destroy so desperately in his life. All the years of fighting for medicine, and a place in the world of the healer . . . they were wasted.

He now knew the Phymechs weren't better than humans . . . but how could he prove it? Unsubstantiated claims, brought to Calkins, would only be met with more intimidation, and probably a revoking of his license. He was trapped solidly.

How much longer could it go on?

Behind him, mechanical ears tuned, robot eyes fastened on the slumping, walking man. Rain was no deterrent to observation.

The murmur of a beater's rotors caused Bergman to look up. He could see nothing through the swirling rain-mist, but he could hear it, and his hatred reached out. Then: *I don't hate machines, I never did. Only now that they've deprived me of my humanity, now that they've taken away my life. Now I hate them.* His eyes sparked again with submerged loathing as he searched the sky beneath the climate dome, hearing the whirr of the beater's progress meshing with the faint hum of the dome at work; he desperately sought something against which he might direct his feelings of helplessness, of inadequacy.

So intent was he that he did not see the old woman who stepped out stealthily from the service entrance of a building, till she had put a trembling hand on his sleeve.

The shadows swirled about the shape watching Bergman—and now the old woman—from down the street.

"You a doctor, ain'cha?"

He started, his head jerking around spastically. His dark eyes focused on her seamed face only with effort. In the dim light of the illumepost that filtered through the rain, Bergman could see she was dirty and ill-kempt. Obviously from the tenements in Slobtown, way out near the curve-down edge of the climate dome.

She licked her lips again, fumbling in the pockets of her torn jumpette, nervous to the point of terror, unable to drag forth her words.

"*Well.* What do you want? Bergman was harsher than he had intended, but his banked-down antagonism prodded him into belligerence.

"I been watchin' for three days and Charlie's gettin' worse and his stomach's swellin' and I noticed you been comin' outta the hospital every day now for three days . . ." The words tumbled out almost incoherently, slurred by a gutter accent. To Bergman's tutored ear—subjected to these sounds since Kohlbenschlagg had taken him in—there was something else in the old woman's voice: the helpless tones of horror in asking someone to minister to an afflicted loved one.

Bergman's deep blue-black eyes narrowed. What was this? Was this filthy woman trying to get him to attend at her home? Was this perhaps a trap set up by Calkins and the Hospital Board? "What do you *want,* woman?" he demanded, edging away.

"Ya gotta come over ta see Charlie. He's dyin', Doctor, he's dyin'! He just lays there twitchin', and evertime I touch him he jumps and starts throwin' his arms round and doublin' over an' everything!" Her eyes were wide with the fright of memory, and her mouth shaped the words hurriedly, as though she knew she must get them out before the mouth used itself to scream.

The doctor's angry thoughts, suspicious thoughts, cut off instantly, and another part of his nature took command. Clinical attention centered on the malady the woman was describing.

". . . an' he keeps *grinnin'*, Doctor, grinnin' like he was dead and everything was funny or somethin'! That's the worst of all . . . I can't stand ta see him that way, Doctor. Please . . . please . . . ya gotta help me. Help Charlie, Doc, he's dyin'. We been tagether five years an' ya gotta . . . gotta . . . do . . . somethin' . . ." She broke into convulsive weeping, her faded eyes pleading with him, her knife-edged shoulders heaving jerkily within the jumpette.

My God, thought Bergman, *she's describing tetanus! And a badly advanced case to have produced spasms and* risus sardonicus. *Good Lord, why doesn't she get him to the hospital? He'll be dead in a day if she doesn't.* Aloud, he said, still suspicious, "Why did you wait so long? Why didn't you take him to the hospital?" He jerked his thumb at the lighted block across the street.

All his earlier anger, plus the innate exasperation of a doctor confronted with seemingly callous disregard for the needs of a sick man, came out in the questions. Exploded. The old woman drew back, eyes terrified, seamed face drawn up in an expression of beatenness. The force of him confused her.

"I—I *couldn't* take him there, Doc. I just couldn't! Charlie wouldn't let me, anyhow. He said, last thing before he started twitchin', he said, don't take me over there to that hospital, Katie, with them metal things in there, promise me ya won't. So I hadda promise him, Doc, and ya gotta come ta see him—*he's dyin', Doc, ya gotta help us, he's dyin'!*"

She was close up to him, clutching at the lapels of his jumper with wrinkled hands; impossibly screaming in a hoarse whisper. The raw emotion of her appeal struck Bergman almost physically. He staggered back from her, her breath of garlic and the slums enfolding him. She pressed up again, clawing at him with great sobs and pleas.

Bergman was becoming panicky. If a robocop should see the old woman talking to him, it might register his name, and that would be his end at Memorial. They'd have him tagged for home-practitioning, even if it wasn't true. How could he *possibly* attend this woman's man? It would be the end of his stunted career. The regulations swam before his eyes, and he knew what they meant. He'd be finished. And what if this *was* a trap?

But *tetanus!*

(The terrifying picture of a man in the last stages of lockjaw came to

him. The contorted body, wound up on itself as though the limbs were made of rubber; the horrible face, mouth muscles drawn back and down in the characteristic death-grin called *risus sardonicus;* every inch of the nervous system affected. A slamming door, a touch, a cough, was enough to send the stricken man into ghastly gyrations and convulsions. Till finally the affliction attacked the chest muscles, and he strangled horribly. Dead . . . wound up like a snake, frothing . . . dead.)

But to be thrown out of the hospital. He couldn't take the chance. Almost without realizing it, the words came out: "Get away from me, woman; if the robocops see you, they'll arrest us both. Getaway . . . and don't try approaching a doctor like this again! Or I'll see that you're run in myself. Now get away. If you need medical aid, go to the phymechs at the hospital. They're free and better than any human!" The words sounded tinny in his ears.

The old woman fell back, light from the illumepost casting faint, weird shadows across the lined planes of her face. Her lips drew back from her teeth, many of them rotting or missing.

She snorted, "We'd rather die than go to them creations of the devil! We don't have no truck with them things . . . we thought you was still doctors to help the poor . . . but you ain't!" She turned and started to slip away into the darkness.

Faintly, before the rustle of her footsteps were gone, Stuart Bergman heard the sob that escaped her. It was filled with a wild desperation and the horror of seeing death in the mist, waiting for her and the man she loved.

Then, ever more faintly . . .

"Damn you forever!"

Abruptly, the tension of the past months, the inner horror at what he had almost done to the blue-eyed girl earlier, the fight and sorrow within him, mounted to a peak. He felt drained, and knew if he was to be deprived of his heritage, he would lose it the right way. He was a doctor, and a man needed attention.

He took a step after her dim shape in the rain.

"Wait, I . . ."

And knowing he was sealing his own doom, he let her stop, watched the hope that swam up in her eyes, and said, "I—I'm sorry.

I'm very tired. But take me to your man. I'll be able to help him."

She didn't say thank you. But he knew it was there if he wanted it. They moved off together, and the watcher followed on silent treads.

Chapter Six

The forever stink of Slobtown assaulted Bergman the moment they passed the invisible boundary. There was no "other side of the tracks" that separated Slobtown's squalor from the lower middle-class huts of the city, but somehow there was no mistaking the transition.

They passed from cleanliness into the Inferno, with one step.

Shadows deepened, sounds muffled, and the flickering neon of outdated saloon signs glared at them from the darkness. Bergman followed stolidly, and the woman led with resignation. She had a feeling the trip would be in vain. Charlie had been close to the edge when she had left, and this doctor's coming was an unexpected miracle. But still, Charlie had been so close, so close . . .

They threaded close to buildings, stepping wide around blacker alley mouths and empty lots. From time to time they heard the footpad of muggers and wineheads keeping pace with them, but when the noises became too apparent, the woman hissed into the darkness, "Geddaway from here! I'm Charlie Kickback's woman, an' I got a croaker fer Charlie!" Then the sounds would fall behind.

All but the metal follower, whom no one saw.

The raw sounds of filthy music spurted out of the swing doors of a saloon, as they passed, and were followed almost immediately by a body. The man was thrown past the building, and landed in a twisted heap in the dirty gutter. He lay twitching, and for an instant Bergman considered tending to him; but two things stopped him.

The woman dragged him by his sleeve, and the gutter-resident flopped over onto his back, bubbling, and began mouthing an incomprehensible melody with indecipherable words.

They moved past. A block further along, Bergman saw the battered remains of a robocop, lying up against a tenement. He nodded toward it, and in the dusk Charlie Kickback's woman shrugged. "Every stiff comes in here takes his chances, even them devil's tinkertoys."

They kept moving, and Bergman realized he had much more to fear than merely being deprived of his license. He could be attacked and killed down here. He had a wallet with nearly three hundred credits in it, and they'd mugged men down here for much less than that, he was sure.

But somehow, the futility of the day, the horror of the night, were too insurmountable. He worried more about the fate of his profession than the contents of the wallet.

Finally they came to a brightly-lit building, with tri-V photoblox outside, ten feet high. The blox showed monstrously-mammaried women doing a slow tri-V shimmy, their appendages swaying behind the thinnest of veils, which often parted. The crude neon signs about the building read:

THE HOUSE OF SEX SEX SEX SEX!!!
AFTER SHOWS THE GIRLS' TIME IS THEIR OWN AND NO HOLDS BARRED!
MORE THAN YOU CAN IMAGINE FOR A CREDIT!!!
LADY MEMPHIS AND HER EDUCATED BALOO—TRIX DIAMOND—MLLE. HOT!
COME NOW, JACK, COME NOW!!

Bergman inclined his head at the poster blox, at the signs, and asked, "Is he here?" Charlie Kickback's woman's face greyed-down and her lips thinned. She nodded, mumbled something, and led Bergman past the ticket window with its bulletproof glass and steel-suited ticket-taker. The woman snapped a finger at the taker, and a heavy plasteel door slid back for them. The moment it opened, tinny music, fraught with the bump and *grrrr*ind of the burlesque since time immemorial, swept over them, and Bergman had to strain to hear Charlie Kickback's woman.

He tensed, and caught her voice. "This way . . . through the side door . . ."

They passed the open back of the theater, and Bergman's eyes caught the idle twist of flesh, and the sensuous beat of naked feet on a stage. The sounds of warwhoop laughter and applause sifted up through the blaring music. They passed through the side door.

The woman led him down a hall, and past several dim grey doors with peeling paint. She stopped before a door with a faded star on it,

and said, "He-he's in h-here . . ." And she palmed the door open quietly.

She had not needed the silence.

Charlie Kickback would never writher at a sound again.

He was quite dead.

Twisted in on himself, wound up like some loathsome pretzel, he lay on the floor beneath the dirty sink, one leg twisted under himself so painfully, it had broken before death. He had strangled to death.

The old woman rushed to the body, and fell to her knees, burying her face in his clothing, crying, namelessly seeking after him. She cried solidly for a few minutes, while Bergman stood watching, his heart filled with pity and sorrow and unhappiness and frustration.

This never would have happened, if . . .

The woman looked up, and her face darkened. "You! You're the ones brought in them robots. We can't stay alive even no more, cause of them! It's you . . . and them . . ."

She burst into tears again, and fell back on the inert body of her lover. Her words fouled in her lips. But Bergman knew she was right. The Phymechs had killed this man as surely as if they had slashed his pulmonary artery.

He turned to leave, and then it was that the follower leaped on him.

It had followed him carefully through Slobtown, it had immobilized the ticket-taker in her suit, it had snaked a tentacle through the ticket window to keep open the door, and had tracked him with internal radex to this room.

Bergman stopped at the door, as the robocop rolled up, and its tentacles slammed out at him. "Help!" was the first thing he could yell, and as he did so, Kickback's woman lifted her streaked face from the dead man, saw the robot, and went berserk.

Her hand dipped to the hem of her skirt, and lifted, exposing leg, slip, and a thigh-holster.

An acidee came up in her fist, and as she pressed the stud, a thin unsplashing stream of vicious acid streaked over Bergman's head, and etched a line across the robocop's hood. Its faceted light-sensitives turned abruptly, fastened on the woman, and a stunner tentacle snaked out, beamed her in her tracks.

As Bergman watched, the robocop suddenly releasing him to

concentrate on the woman, the acidee dropped from her hand, and she spun backward, fell in a heap next to her dead Charlie.

Everything totaled for Bergman. The Phymechs, the death of the thresher victim, the Oath, and the way he had almost shattered it tonight, the death of Charlie, and now this robocop that was the Mechanical God in its vilest form. It all summed up, and Bergman lunged around the robocop, trying to upset it.

It rocked back on its settlers, and tried to grab him. He avoided a tentacle, and streaked out into the hall. The punctuated, syncopated, stop-beat of the burley music welled over him, and he cast about in desperation. Leaning against one wall he saw a long, thick-handled metal bar with a screw-socket on its top, for removing the outdated light units from the high ceilings.

He grabbed it and turned on the robocop as it rolled slowly after him. His back to the wall, he held it first like a staff, then further down the handle, angling it. As the robocop approached, Bergman lunged, and brought fiercely his hatred to the surface. The club came down and smashed with a muted twanggg! across the robocop's hood. A tiny, tiny dent appeared in the metal, but it kept coming, steadily.

Bergman continued to smash at it.

His blows landed ineffectually, many of them missing entirely, but he struggled and smashed and smashed and smashed and his scream rose over the music, "Die, you bastard rotten chunk of tin, die, die, and let us alone so we can die in peace when we have to . . ."

Over and over, even after the robocop had taken the club from him, immobilized him, and slung him "fireman's-carry" over his tote-area.

All the way back from Slobtown to the jail, to stand trial for home practitioning, collusion, assaulting a robocop, he screamed his hatred and defiance.

Even in his cell, all night long, in his mind, the screams continued. On into the morning, when he found out Calkins had had the robocop trailing him for a week. Suspecting him of just what had happened, long before it had happened. Hoping it would happen. Now it had happened, indeed.

And Stuart Bergman had come to the end of his career.

The end of his life.

He went on trial at 10:40 AM, with the option of human (fallible) jury, or robotic (infallible) jurymech.

Irrationally, he chose the human jury.

An idea, a hope, had flared in the darkness of this finality. If he was going down, Bergman was not going down a coward. He had run long enough. This was another chance.

He meant to make the most of it.

Chapter Seven

The courtroom was silent. Totally and utterly silent, primarily because the observer's bubble was soundproofed, and each member of the jury sat in a hush-cubicle. The jurymen each wore a speak-tip in one ear, and a speaker let the audience know what was happening.

Halfway up the wall, beside the judge's desk, the accused's bubble clung to the wall like a teardrop. Stuart Bergman had sat there throughout the trial, listening to the testimony: the robocop, Calkins (on the affair at the hospital, the day Kohlbenschlagg had died; the affair of the lounge; the suspicion and eventual assigning of a robocop to trail the doctor; Bergman's general attitudes, his ability to have performed the crime of which he had been accused), the old woman, who was pentatholed before she would speak against Bergman, and even Murray Thomas, who reluctantly admitted that Bergman was quite capable of breaking the law in this case.

Thomas's face was strained and broken and he left the stand, staring up at Bergman with a mixture of remorse and pity burning there.

The time was drawing near, and Bergman could feel the tension in the room. This was the first such case of its kind . . . the first flagrant breaking of the new Hippocratic Laws, and the newsfax and news sheet men were here in hordes; a precedent was to be set . . .

The anti-mech leagues and the humanitarian organizations were here also. The case was a sensational one, mostly because it was the first of its kind, and would set the future pattern. Bergman knew he had to take good advantage of that.

And he also knew that advantage would have been lost, had he chosen a robot jurymech to try the case.

The nice things about humans tied in with their irrationality. They were human, they could see the human point of view. A robot would see the robotic point of view. Bergman desperately needed that human factor.

This had grown much larger than just his own problems of adaptation. The fate of the profession lay in his hands, and uncountable lives, lost through stupidity and blind dead faith in the all-powerful God of the Machine.

Deus ex machina, Bergman thought bitterly, *I'm gonna give you a run for your rule today!*

He waited silently, listening to the testimonies, and then, finally, his turn came to speak.

He told them a story, from the accused's bubble. Not one word of defense . . . he did not need that. But the story, and the real story. It was difficult to get it out without falling into bathos or melodrama. It was even harder to keep from lashing out insanely at the machines.

Once, a snicker started up from the audience, but the others scathed the laughter to silence with vicious stares. After that, they listened . . .

The years of study.

The death of Kohlbenschlagg.

The day of the Operation.

Calkins and his approach to medicine.

The fear of the people for the machines.

Charlie Kickback's woman, and her terrors.

When he finally came to the story of the thresher amputee, and the calm workings of the Phymech as his patient died, the eyes turned from Bergman. They turned to the silent cubicle where the jurymech lay inactive in waiting for the next case where an accused would select robot over human.

Many began to wonder how smart it would be to select the robot. Many wondered how smart they had been to put their faith in machines. Bergman was playing them, he knew he was, and felt a slight qualm about it—but there was more involved here than merely saving his license. Life was at stake.

As he talked, calmly and softly, they watched him, and watched Calkins, and the jurymech.

And when he had finished, there was silence for a long, long time.

Even after the jurybox had sunk into the floor, as deliberations were made, there was silence. People sat and thought, and even the newsfax men took their time about getting to the vidders, to pip in their stories.

When the jurybox rose up out of the floor, they said they must have more deliberation.

Bergman was remanded to custody, placed in a cell to wait. *Something* was going to happen.

Murray Thomas was ushered into the cell, and he held Bergman's hand far longer than was necessary for mere greeting.

His face was solemn when he said, "You've won, Stu."

Bergman felt a great wave of relief and peace settle through him. He had suspected he would; the situation could be verified, and if they checked for what he had pointed out, not just blind faith in the machine, they would uncover the truth . . . it must have happened before, many times.

Thomas said, "The news sheets are full of it, Stu. Biggest thing since total automation. People are scared, Stu, but they're scared the right way. There aren't any big smash sessions, but people are considering their position and the relation of the robot to them.

"There's a big movement afoot for a return to human domination. I—I hate to admit it, Stu . . . but I think you were right all along. I wanted to settle back too easily. It took guts, Stu. A lot of guts. I'm afraid I'd have sent that woman away, not gone to tend her man."

Bergman waved away his words. He sat staring at his hands, trying to find a place for himself in the sudden rationale that had swept over his world.

Thomas said, "They've got Calkins for investigation. Seems there was some sort of collusion between him and the manufacturer of the Phymechs. That was why they were put in so quickly, before they'd been fully tested. But they called in the man from the Zsebok Company, and he had to testify they couldn't build in a bedside manner . . . too nebulous a concept, or something.

"I've been restored to full status as a surgeon, Stu. They're looking around for a suitable reward for you."

Stuart Bergman was not listening. He was remembering a man twisted up in death—who need not have died—and a blue-eyed girl

who had lived, and an amputee who had screamed his life away. He thought of it all, and of what had happened, and he knew deep within himself that it was going to be all right now. It wasn't just *his* victory . . . it was the victory of humanity. Man had stopped himself on the way to dependence and decadence, and had reversed a terrible trend.

The machines would not be put away entirely.

They would work along with people, and that was as it should have been, for the machines were tools, like any other tools. But human involvement was the key factor now, again.

Bergman settled back against the cell wall, and closed his eyes in the first real rest he had known for oh so long a time. He breathed deeply, and smiled to himself.

Reward?

He had his reward.

Repetitiously, the unifying theme to the stories in this collection is pain, human anguish. But there is a sub-text that informs the subject; it is this: we are all inescapably responsible, not only for our own actions, but for our lack of action, the morality and ethic of our silences and our avoidances, the shared guilt of hypocrisy, voyeurism, and cowardice; what might be called the "spectator-sport social conscience." Catherine Genovese, Martin Luther King, Viola Luizzo, Nathaniel West, Marilyn Monroe . . . how the hell do we face them if there's something like a Hereafter? And how do we make it day-to-day, what with mirrors everywhere we look, if there isn't *a Hereafter? Perhaps it all comes down to the answer to the question any middle-aged German in, say, Munich, might ask today: "If I didn't do what they said, they'd kill me. I had to save my life, didn't I?" I'm sure when it comes right down to it, the most ignominious life is better than no life at all, but again and again I find the answer coming from somewhere too noble to be within myself: "What for?" Staying alive only has merit if one does it with dignity, with purpose, with responsibility to his fellow man. If these are absent, then living is a slug-like thing, more a matter of habit than worth. Without courage, the pain will destroy you. And, oh, yeah, about this story . . . the last section came first. It was a tone-poem written to a little folk song Tom Scott wrote, titled "38th Parallel," which Rusty Draper recorded vocally some years later as "Lonesome Song." If you can find a 45 rpm of it anywhere, and play it as you read the final sections, it will vastly enhance, audibly coloring an explanation of what I mean when I talk about pain that is*

Deeper Than the Darkness

A Folk Song of the Future

THEY CAME TO ALF GUNNDERSON in the Pawnee County jail.

He was sitting, hugging his boney knees, against the plasteel wall of the cell. On the plasteel floor lay an ancient, three-string mandolin he had borrowed from the deputy, he had been plunking with some talent all that hot, summer day. Under his thin buttocks the empty trough of his mattressless bunk curved beneath his weight. He was an extremely tall man, even hunched up that way.

He was more than tired-looking, more than weary. His was an inside weariness . . . he was a gaunt, empty-looking man. His hair fell lanky and drab and gray-brown in shocks over a low forehead. His eyes seemed to be peas, withdrawn from their pods and placed in a starkly white face. It was difficult to tell whether he could see from them.

Their blankness only accented the total cipher he seemed. There was no inch of expression or recognition on his face, in the line of his body.

More, he was a thin man. He seemed to be a man who had given up the Search long ago. His face did not change its hollow stare at the plasteel-barred door opposite, even as it swung back to admit the two nonentities.

The two men entered, their stride as alike as the unobtrusive grey mesh suits they wore; as alike as the faces that would fade from memory moments after they had turned. The turnkey—a grizzled country deputy with a minus 8 rating—stared after the men with open wonder on his bearded face.

One of the grey-suited men turned, pinning the wondering stare to the deputy's face. His voice was calm and uprippled. "Close the door and go back to your desk." The words were cold and paced. They brooked no opposition. It was obvious: they were Mindees.

The roar of a late afternoon inverspace ship split the waiting

moment, outside, then the turnkey slammed the door, palming it loktite. He walked back out of the cell block, hands deep in his coverall pockets. His head was lowered as though he were trying to solve a complex problem. It, too, was obvious: he was trying to block his thoughts off from those goddamned Mindees.

When he was gone, the telepaths circled Gunnderson slowly. Their faces softly altered, subtly, and personality flowed in with quickness. They shot each other confused glances.

Him? The first man thought, nodding slightly at the still, knee-hugging prisoner.

That's what the report said, Ralph. The other man removed his forehead-concealing snapbrim and sat down on the edge of the bunk-trough. He touched Gunnderson's leg with tentative fingers. *He's not thinking, for God's sake!* the thought flashed. *I can't get a thing.*

Incredulousness sparkled in the thought.

He must be blocked off by trauma-barrier, came the reply from the telepath named Ralph.

"Is your name Alf Gunnderson?" the first Mindee inquired softly, a hand on Gunnderson's shoulder.

The expression never changed. The head swiveled slowly and the dead eyes came to bear on the dark-suited telepath. "I'm Gunnderson," he replied briefly. His tones indicated no enthusiasm, no curiosity.

The first man looked up at his partner, doubt wrinkling in his eyes, pursing his lips. He shrugged his shoulders, as if to say, *Who knows?*

He turned back to Gunnderson.

Immobile, as before. Hewn from rock, silent as the pit.

"What are you in here for, Gunnderson?" He spoke as though he were unused to words. The halting speech of the telepath.

The dead stare swung back to the pasteel bars. "I set the woods on fire," he said shortly.

The Mindee's face darkened at the prisoner's words. That was what the report had said. The report that had come in from one of the remote corners of the country.

The American Continent was a modern thing, all plasteel and printed circuits, all relays and fast movement, but there had been areas of backwoods country that had never taken to civilizing. They

still maintained roads and jails, and fishing holes and forests. Out of one of these had come three reports, spaced an hour apart, with startling ramifications—if true. They had been snapped through the primary message banks in Capitol City in Buenos Aires, reeled through the computalyzers, and handed to the Bureau for check-in. While the inverspace ships plied between worlds, while Earth fought its transgalatic wars, in a rural section of the American Continent, a strange thing was happening.

A mile and a half of raging forest fire, and Alf Gunnderson the one responsible. So they had sent two Bureau Mindees.

"How did it start, Alf?"

The dead eyes closed momentarily, in pain, opened, and he answered, "I was trying to get the pot to heat up. Trying to set the kindling under it to burning. I fired myself too hard." A flash of self-pity and unbearable hurt came into his face, disappeared just as quickly. Empty once more, he added, "I always do."

The first man exhaled sharply, got up and put on his hat. The personality flowed out of his face. He was a carbon copy of the other telepath once more.

"This is the one," he said.

"Come on, Alf," the Mindee named Ralph said. "Let's go."

The authority of his voice no more served to move Gunnderson than their initial appearance had. He sat as he was. The two men looked at one another.

What's the matter with him? the second one flashed.

If you had what he's got—you'd be a bit buggy yourself, the first one replied. They were no longer individuals; they were Bureau men, studiedly, exactly, precisely alike in every detail.

They hoisted the prisoner under his arms, lifted him off the bunk, unresisting. The turnkey came at a call, and still marveling at these men who had come in—shown Bureau cards, sworn him to deadly silence, and were now taking the tramp firebug with them—opened the cell door.

As they passed before him, the telepath named Ralph turned suddenly sharp and piercing eyes on the old guard. "This is government business, mister," he warned. "One word of this, and you'll be a prisoner in your own jail. Clear?"

The turnkey bobbed his head quickly.

"And stop thinking, mister." The Mindee added nastily, "we don't like to be referred to as slimy peekers!" The turnkey turned a shade paler and watched silently as they disappeared down the hall, out of the Pawnee County jailhouse. He waited, blanking fiercely, till he heard the whine of the Bureau solocab rising into the afternoon sky.

Now what the devil did they want with a crazy firebug hobo like that? He thought viciously, *Goddam Mindees!*

After they had flown him cross-continent to Buenos Aires, deep in the heart of the blasted Argentine desert, they sent him in for testing.

The testing was exhaustive. Even though he did not really co-operate, there were things he could not keep them from learning; things that showed up because they were there:

Such as his ability to start fires with his mind.

Such as the fact that he could not control the blazes.

Such as the fact that he had been bumming for fifteen years in an effort to find seclusion.

Such as the fact that he had become a tortured and unhappy man because of his strange mind-power.

"Alf," said the bodiless voice from the rear of the darkened auditorium, "light that cigarette on the table. Put it in your mouth and make it light, Alf. Without a match."

Alf Gunnderson stood in the circle of light. He shifted from leg to leg on the blazing stage, and eyed the cylinder of white paper on the table.

It was starting again. The harrying, the testing, the staring with strangeness. He was different—even from the other accredited psioid types—and they would try to put him away. It had happened before, it was happening now. There was no real peace for him.

"I don't smoke," he said, which was not true. But this was brother kin to the uncountable police line-ups he had gone through, all the way across the American Continent, across Earth, and from A Centauri IX back here. It annoyed him, and it terrified him, for he knew he was trapped.

Except this time there were no hard rocky-faced cops out there in the darkness beyond his sight. This time there were hard, rocky-faced Bureau men, and SpaceCom officials.

Even Terrence, head of SpaceCom, was sitting in one of those pneumoseats, watching him steadily.

Daring him to be what he was!

He lifted the cylinder hesitantly, almost put it back.

"Smoke it, Alf!" snapped a different voice, deeper in tone, from the ebony before him.

He put the cigarette between his lips. They waited.

He seemed to want to say something, perhaps to object. Alf Gunnderson's heavy brows drew down. His blank eyes became—if it were possible—ever blanker. A sharp, denting V appeared between the brows.

The cigarette flamed into life.

A tongue of fire leaped up from the tip. In an instant it had consumed tobacco, paper, filter and de-nicotizer in one roar. The fire slammed against Gunnderson's lips, scaring them, lapping at his nose, his face.

He screamed, fell on his face and beat at the flames with his hands.

Suddenly the stage was clogged with running men in the blue and charcoal suits of the SpaceCom. Gunnderson lay writhing on the floor, a wisp of charry smoke rising from his face. One of the SpaceCom officials broke the cap on an extinguisher vial and the spray washed over the body of the fallen man.

"Get the mallaport! Get the goddamned mallaport, willya!" A young ensign with brush-cut blond hair, first to reach the stage, as though he had been waiting crouched below, cradled Gunnderson's head in his muscular arms, brushing with horror at the flakes of charred skin. He had the watery blue eyes of the spacemen, the man who has seen terrible things; yet his eyes were more frightened now than any man's eyes had a right to be.

In a few minutes the angular, spade-pawed, malleable-transporter was smoothing the skin on Gunnderson's face, realigning the atoms—shearing away the burned flesh, coating it with vibrant, healthy pink skin.

Another few moments and the psioid was finished; the burns had been erased; Gunnderson was new and whole, save for the patches of healthier-seeming skin that dotted his face.

All through it he had been murmuring. As the mallaport finished his mental work, stood up with a sigh, the word filtered through to the

young SpaceCom ensign. He stared at Gunnderson a moment, then raised his watery blue eyes to the other officials standing about.

He stared at them with a mixture of fear and bewilderment.

Gunnderson had been saying: "Let me die, please let me die, I want to die, won't you let me die, please!"

The ship was heading toward Omalo, sun of the Delgart system. It had been translated into inverspace by a Driver named Carina Correia. She had warped the ship through, and gone back to her deep-sleep, till she was needed at Omalo snap-out.

Now the ship whirled through the crazy quilt of inverspace, cutting through to the star-system of Earth's adversary.

Gunnderson sat in the cabin with the brush-cut blond ensign. All through the trip, since blast-off and snap-out, the pyrotic had been kept in his stateroom. This was the newest of the Earth SpaceCom-ships, yet he had seen none of it. Just this tiny stateroom, in the constant company of the usually stoical ensign.

The SpaceCom man's watery blue eyes swept between the pallid man and the teleport-proof safe set in the cabin's bulkhead.

"Any idea why they're sending us so deep into Delgart territory?" the Ensign fished. "It's pretty tight lines up this far. Must be something big. Any idea?"

Gunnderson's eyes came up from their focus on his boot-tops, and stared at the spaceman. He idly flipped the harmonica he had requested before blast-off, which he had used to pass away the long hours inverspace. "No idea. How long have you been at war with the Delgarts?"

"Don't you even know who your planet's at war with?"

"I've been rural for many years. But aren't they *always* at war with someone?"

The Ensign looked startled. "Not unless it's to protect the peace of the galaxies. Earth is a *peace* loving . . ."

Gunnderson cut him off. "Yes, I know. But how long have you been at war with the Delgarts? I thought they were our allies under some Treaty Pact or other?"

The spaceman's face contorted in a picture of conditioned hatred. "We've been after the bastards since they jumped one of our mining planets outside their cluster." He twisted his lips in open loathing.

"We'll clean the bastards out soon enough! Teach *them* to jump peaceful Earthmen."

Gunnderson wished he could shut out the words. He had heard the same story all the way from A Centauri IX and back. Someone had always jumped someone else . . . someone was always at war with someone else . . . there were always bastards to be cleaned out . . . never any peace . . . never any peace . . .

The invership whipped past the myriad odd-colors of inverspace, hurtling through that not-space toward the alien cluster. Gunnderson sat in the teleport-proof state-room, triple-coded loktite, and waited. He had no idea what they wanted of him, why they had tested him, why they had sent him through the pre-flight checkups, why he was in not-space. But he knew one thing: whatever it was, there was to be no peace for *him* . . . ever.

He silently cursed the strange mental power he had. The power to make the molecules of *anything* speed up tremendously, making them grind against one another, causing combustion. A strange, channeled teleport faculty that was useless for anything but the creation of fire. He damned it soulfully, wishing he had been born deaf, mute, blind, incapable of having to ward off the world.

From the first moment of his life when he had realized his strange power, he had been haunted. No control, no identification, no communication. Cut off. Tagged as an oddie. Not even the pleasures of being an acknowledged psioid, like the Mindees, or the invaluable Drivers, or the Blasters, or the Mallaports who could move the atoms of flesh to their design. He was an oddie. A strange-breed, and worse: he was a non-directive psioid. Tagged deadly and uncontrollable. He could set the fires, but he could not control them. The molecules were too tiny, too quickly imitative for him to stop the activity once it was started. It had to stop of its own volition . . . and occasionally it was too long in stopping.

Once he had thought himself normal, once he had thought of leading an ordinary life—of perhaps becoming a musician. But that idea had died aflaming, as all other normal ideas that had followed it.

First the ostracism, then the hunting, then the arrests and the prison terms, one after another. Now something new—something he could not understand. What did they want with him? It was obviously

in connection with the mighty battle being fought between Earth and the Delgarts, but of what use could his unreliable powers be?

Why was he in this most marvelous of the new SpaceCom ships, heading toward the central sun of the enemy cluster? And why should he help Earth in any case?

At that moment the locks popped, the safe broke open, and the clanging of the alarms was heard to the bowels of the invership.

The Ensign stopped him as he started to rise, started toward the safe. The Ensign thumbed a button on his wrist-console.

"Hold it, Mr. Gunnderson. I wasn't told what was in there, but I was told to keep you away from it until the other two got here."

Gunnderson slumped back hopelessly on the acceleration-bunk. He dropped the harmonica to the metal floor and lowered his head into his hands. "What other two?"

"I don't know, sir. I wasn't told."

The other two were psioids, naturally.

When the Mindee and the Blaster arrived, they motioned the Ensign to remove the contents of the safe. He walked over nervously, took out the tiny trecorder and the single speak-tip.

"Play it, Ensign," the Mindee directed.

The spaceman thumbed the speak-tip into the hole, and the grating of the blank space at the beginning of the tip filled the room.

"You can leave now, Ensign," the Mindee said.

After the SpaceCom officer had securely loktited the door, the voice began. Gunnderson recognized it immediately as that of Terrence, head of SpaceCom. The man who had questioned him tirelessly at the Bureau building in Buenos Aires. Terrence, hero of another war, the Earth-Kyben war, now head of SpaceCom. The words were brittle, almost without inflection and to the point, yet they carried a sense of utmost importance:

"Gunnderson," it began, "we have, as you already know, a job for you. By this time the ship will have reached central-point of your trip through inverspace.

"You will arrive in two days Earthtime at a slip-out point approximately five hundred million miles from Omalo, the enemy sun. You will be far behind enemy lines, but we are certain you will be able to

accomplish your mission safely, that is why you have been given this new ship. It can withstand anything the enemy can throw.

"But we want you to get back for other reasons. You are the most important man in our war effort, Gunnderson, and it's tied up with your mission.

"We want you to turn the sun Omalo into a supernova."

Gunnderson, for the first time in thirty-eight years of bleak, gray life, was staggered. The very concept made his stomach churn. Turn another people's sun into a flaming, gaseous bomb of incalculable power, spreading death into space, burning off the very layers of its being, charring into nothing the planets of the system? Annihilate in one move an entire culture?

Was it possible they thought him mad?

What did they think he was capable of?

Could he direct his mind to such a task?

Could he do it?

Should he do it?

His mind boggled at the possibility. He had never really considered himself as having many ideals. He had set fires in warehouses to get the owners their liability insurance; he had flamed other hobos who had tried to rob him; he had used the unpredictable power of his mind for many things, but this. . .

This was the murder of a solar system!

He wasn't in any way sure he *could* turn a sun supernova. What was there to lead them to think he might be able to do it? Burning a forest and burning a giant red sun were two things fantastically far apart. It was something out of a nightmare. But even if he *could*. . .

"In case you find the task unpleasant, Mr. Gunnderson," the ice-chip voice of the SpaceCom head continued, "we have included in this ship's complement, a Mindee and a Blaster.

"Their sole job is to watch and protect you, Mr. Gunnderson. To make certain you are kept in the proper, er, *patriotic* state of mind. They have been instructed to read you from this moment on, and should you not be willing to carry out your assignment . . . well, I'm certain you are familiar with a Blaster's capabilities."

Gunnderson stared at the blank-faced telepath sitting across from him on the other bunk. The man was obviously listening to every

thought in Gunnderson's head. A strange, nervous expression was on the Mindee's face. His glaze turned to the Blaster who accompanied him, then back to Gunnderson.

The pyrotic swiveled a glance at the Blaster, then swiveled away as quickly.

Blasters were men meant to do one job, one job only, and a certain type of man he became, he *had* to be, to be successful doing that job. They all looked the same, and Gunnderson found the look almost terrifying. He had not thought he could *be* terrified, any more.

"That is your assignment, Gunnderson, and if you have any hesitance, remember they are *not* human. They are extraterrestrials as unlike you as you are unlike a slug. And remember there's a war on . . . you will be saving the lives of many Earthmen by performing this task.

"This is your chance to become respected, Gunnderson.

"A hero, respected, and for the first time," he paused, as though not wishing to say what was next, "for the first time—worthy of your world."

The rasp-rasp-rasp of the silent record filled the stateroom. Gunnderson said nothing. He could hear the phrase whirling, whirling in his head: *There's a war on*, There's a war on, *There's a war on*, THERE'S A WAR ON! He stood up and slowly walked to the door.

"Sorry, Mr. Gunnderson," the Mindee said emphatically, "we can't allow you to leave this room."

He sat down and lifted the battered mouth organ from where it had fallen. He fingered it for a while, then put it to his lips. He blew, but made no sound.

And he didn't leave.

They thought he was asleep, The Mindee—a cadaverously thin man with hair grayed at the temples and slicked back in strips on top, with a gasping speech and a nervous movement of hand to ear—spoke to the Blaster.

"He doesn't seem to be thinking, John!"

The Blaster's smooth, hard features moved vaguely, in the nearest thing to an expression, and a quirking frown split his ink-line mouth. "Can he do it?"

The Mindee rose, ran a hand quickly through the straight, slicked hair.

"Can he do it? No, he shouldn't be *able* to do it, but he's doing it! I can't figure it out . . . it's eerie, uncanny. Either I've lost it, or he's got something new."

"Trauma-barrier?"

"That's what they told me before I left, that he seemed to be blocked off. But they thought it was only temporary, once he was away from the Bureau buildings he would clear up.

"But he *isn't* cleared up."

The Blaster looked concerned. "Maybe it's you."

"I didn't get a Master's rating for nothing, John, and I tell you there isn't a trauma-barrier I can't at least get *something* through. If only a snatch of gabble. But there's nothing . . . nothing!"

"Maybe it's you," the Blaster repeated, still concerned.

"Damn it! It's *not* me! I can read you, can't I—your right foot hurts from new boots, you wish you could have the bunk to lie down on, you . . . oh hell, I can read *you*—and I can read the Captain up front, and I can read the pitmen in the hold, but I *can't* read *him!*

"It's like hitting a sheet of glass in his head. There should be a reflection or some penetration, but it seems to be opaqued. I didn't want to say anything when he was awake, of course."

"Do you think I should twit him a little—wake him up and warn him we're on to his game?"

The Mindee raised a hand to stop the very thought of the Blaster. "Great Gods, no!" He gestured wildly, "This Gunnderson's invaluable. If they found out we'd done anything unauthorized to him, we'd both be Tanked."

Gunnderson lay on his acceleration-bunk, feigning sleep, listening to them. It was a new discovery to him, what they were saying. He had always suspected the pyrotic faculty of his mind. It was just too unstable to be a true-bred trait. There had to be side-effects, other differences from the norm. He knew *he* could not read minds; was this now another factor? Impenetrability by Mindees? He wondered.

Perhaps the Blaster was powerless, too.

It would never clear away his problem—that was something he could do only in his own mind—but it might make his position and final decision safer.

There was only one way to find out. He knew the Blaster could not actually harm him severely, by SpaceCom's orders, but he wouldn't hesitate blasting off one of the pyrotic's arms—cauterizing it as it disappeared—to warn him, if the situation seemed desperate enough.

The Blaster had seemed to Gunnderson a singularly overzealous man, in any case. It was a terrible risk, but he had to know.

There was only one way to find out, and he took it . . . finding a startling new vitality in himself . . . for the first time in over thirty years. . . .

He snapped his legs off the bunk, and lunged across the stateroom, shouldering aside the Mindee, and straight-arming the Blaster in the mouth. The Blaster, surprised by the rapid and completely unexpected movement, had a reflex thought, and one entire bulkhead was washed by bolts of power. They crackled, and the plasteel buckled. His direction had been upset, had been poor, but Gunnderson knew the instant he regained his mental balance, the power would be directed at him.

The bulkhead oxidized, and popped as it was broken, revealing the outer insulating hull of the invership; rivets snapped out of their holes and clattered to the floor.

Gunnderson was at the stateroom door, palming the loktite open—having watched the manner used by the Blaster when he had left on several occasions—and putting one foot into the companionway.

Then the Blaster struck. His fury rose, and he lost his sense of duty. This man had struck him; he was a psioid . . . an accepted psioid, not an oddie! His eyes deepened their black immeasurably, and his face strained. His cheekbones rose in a stricture of a grin, and the *force* materialized.

All around Gunnderson

He could feel the heat.

He could see his clothes sparking and disappearing.

He could feel his hair charring at the tips.

He could feel the strain of psi power in the air.

But there was no effect on him.

He was safe.

Safe from the power of the Blasters.

Then he knew he didn't have to run.
He turned back to the cabin.
The two psioids were staring at him in open terror.

It was always night inverspace.

The ship constantly ploughed through a swamp of black, with metal inside, and metal outside, and the cold, unchanging devil-dark beyond the metal. Men hated inverspace—they sometimes *took* the years-long journey through normal space, to avoid the chilling life of inverspace. For one moment the total black would surround the ship, and the next they would be sifting through a field of changing, flickering crazy-quilt colors. Then ebony again, then light, then dots, then shafts, then the dark once more. It was ever-changing, like a madman's dream. But not interestingly changing, so one would wish to watch, as one might watch a kaleidoscope. This was strange, and unnatural, something beyond the powers of the mind, or the abilities of the eye to comprehend. Ports were allowed only in the officer's country, and those had solid lead shields that would slam down and dog close at the slap of a button. Nothing could be done, for men were men, and space was his eternal enemy. But no man willingly stared back at the deep of inverspace.

In the officer's country, Alf Gunnderson reached with his sight and his mind into the coal soot that now lay beyond the ship. Since he had proved his invulnerability over the Blaster, he had been given the run of the ship. Where could he go? Nowhere that he could not be found. Guards watched the egress ports at all times, so he was still, in effect, a prisoner on the invership. He had managed to secure time alone, however, and so with the Captain and his officers locked out of the country, he stood alone, watching.

He stared from the giant quartz window, all shields open, all the darkness flowing in. The cabin was dark, but not half so dark as that darkness that was everywhere.

That darkness deeper than the darkness.

What was he? Was he man or was he machine . . . to be told he must turn a sun nova? What of the people on that sun's planets? What of the women and the children . . . alien or not? What of the people who hated war, and the people who served because they had been told to serve, and the people who wanted to be left alone? What of the

men who went into the fields, while their fellow troops dutifully sharpened their war knives, and cried? Cried because they were afraid, and they were tired, and they wanted home without death. What of those men?

Was this war one of salvation or liberation or duty as they parroted the phrases of patriotism? Or was this still another of the unending wars for domination, larger holdings, richer worlds? Was this another dupe of the Universe, where men were sent to their deaths so one type of government, no better than another, could rule? He didn't know. He wasn't sure. He was afraid. He had a power beyond all powers in his hands, and he suddenly found himself not a tramp and a waste, but a man who could demolish a solar system at his own will.

Not even sure he *could* do it, he considered the possibility, and it terrified him, making his legs turn to ice water, his blood to steam. He was suddenly quite lost, and immersed into a deeper darkness than he had ever known. With no way out.

He spoke to himself, letting his words sound foolish to himself, but sounding them just the same, knowing he had avoided sounding them for much too long:

"Can I do it?

"Should I? I've waited so long, so long, to find a place, and now they tell me I've found a place. Is this my final place? Is this what I've lived and searched for? I can be a valuable war weapon. I can be the man the men turn to when they want a job done. But what sort of job?

"Can I do it? Is it more important to me to find peace—even a peace such as this—and to destroy, than to go on with the unrest?"

Alf Gunnderson stared at the night, at the faint tinges of color beginning to form at the edges of his vision, and his mind washed itself in the water of thought. He had discovered much about himself in the past few days. He had discovered many talents, many ideals he had never suspected in himself.

He had discovered he had character, and that he was not a hopeless, oddie hulk, doomed to die wasted. He found he had a future.

If he could make the proper decision.

But what *was* the proper decision?

"Omalo! Omalo snap-out!"

The cry roared through the companionways, bounced down the

halls and against the metal hull of the invership, sprayed from the speakers, and deafened the men asleep beside their squawk-boxes.

The ship ploughed through a maze of colors whose hues were unknown, skiiiiittered scud-wise, and popped out, shuddering. There it was. The sun of Delgart. Omalo. Big. And golden. With planets set about like boulders on the edge of the sea. The sea that was space, and from which this ship had come. With death in its hold, and death in its tubes, and death, nothing but death.

The Blaster and the Mindee escorted Alf Gunnderson to the bridge. They stood back and let him walk to the huge quartz portal. The portal before which the pyrotic had stood so long, so many hours, gazing so deep into inverspace. They left him there, and stood back, because they knew he was safe from them. No matter how hard they held his arms, no matter how fiercely they shouted at him, he was safe. He was something new. Not just a pyrotic, not just a mind-blocked, not just a Blaster-safe, he was something totally new.

Not a composite, for there had been many of those, with imperfect powers of several psi types. But something new, and something incomprehensible. Psioid + with a + that might mean anything.

Gunnderson moved forward slowly, his deep shadow squirming out before him, sliding up the console, across the portal shelf, and across the quartz itself. Himself superimposed across the immensity of space.

The man who was Gunnderson stared into the night that lay without, and at the sun that burned steadily and high in that night. A greater fire raged within him than on that molten surface.

His was a power he could not even begin to estimate, and if he let it be used in this way, this once, it could be turned to this purpose over and over and over again.

Was there any salvation for him?

"You're supposed to flame that sun, Gunnderson," the slick-haired Mindee said, trying to assume an authoritative tone, a tone of command, but failing miserably. He knew he was powerless before this man. They could shoot him, of course, but what would that accomplish?

"What are you going to do, Gunnderson? What do you have in mind?" the Blaster chimed in. "SpaceCom wants Omalo fired . . . are you going to do it, or do we have to report you as a traitor?"

"You know what they'll do to you back on Earth, Gunnderson. You know, don't you?"

Alf Gunnderson let the light of Omalo wash his sunken face with red haze. His eyes seemed to deepen in intensity. His hands on the console ledge stiffened and the knuckles turned white. He had seen the possibilities, and he had decided. They would never understand that he had chosen the harder. He turned slowly.

"Where is the lifescoot located?"

They stared at him, and he repeated his question. They refused to answer, and he shouldered past them, stepped into the droptube to take him below decks. The Mindee spun on him, his face raging.

"You're a coward and a traitor, fireboy! You're a lousy no-psi freak and we'll get you! You can take the lifeboat, but someday we'll find you! No matter where you go out there, we're going to find you!"

He spat then, and the Blaster strained and strained and strained, but the power of his mind had no effect on Gunnderson.

The pyrotic let the dropshaft lower him, and he found the lifescoot some time later. He took nothing with him but the battered harmonica, and the red flush of Omalo on his face.

When they felt the *pop!* of the lifescoot being snapped into space, and they saw the dark grey dot of it moving rapidly away, flicking quickly off into inverspace, the Blaster and the Mindee slumped into relaxers, stared at each other.

"We'll have to finish the war without him."

The Blaster nodded. "He could have won it for us in one minute. He's gone."

"Do you think he could have done it?"

The Blaster shrugged his heavy shoulders. "I just don't know. Perhaps."

"He's gone," the Mindee repeated bitterly. "*He's* gone? Coward! Traitor! Some day . . . some day. . . ."

"Where can he go?"

"He's a wanderer at heart. Space is deep, he can go anywhere."

"Did you mean that, about finding him some day?"

The Mindee nodded rapidly. "When they find out, back on Earth, what he did today, they'll start hunting him through all of space. He'll never have another moment's peace. They *have* to find him . . . he's the perfect weapon. But he can't run forever. They'll find him."

"A strange man."

"A man with a power he can't hide, John. A man who will sooner or later give himself away. He *can't* hide himself cleverly enough to stay hidden forever."

"Odd that he would turn himself into a fugitive. He could have had peace of mind for the rest of his life. Instead, he's got this. . . ."

The Mindee stared at the closed portal shields. His tones were bitter and frustrated. "We'll find him some day."

The ship shuddered, reversed drives, and slipped back into inverspace.

Much sky winked back at him.

He sat on the bluff, wind tousling his grey hair, flapping softly at the dirty shirt-tail hanging from his pants top.

The Minstrel sat on the bluff watching the land fall slopingly away under him, down to the shining hide of the sprawling dragon, lying in the cup of the hills. The dragon slept—awake—across once lush grass and productive ground.

City.

On this far world, far from a red sun that shone high and steady, the Minstrel sat and pondered the many kinds of peace. And the kind that is not peace, can *never* be peace.

His eyes turned once more to the sage and eternal advice of the blackness above. No one saw him wink back at the silent stars. Deeper than the darkness.

With a sigh he slung the battered theremin over his frayed shoulders. It was a portable machine, with both rods bent, and its power-pack patched and soldered. His body almost at once assumed the half-slouch, round-shouldered walk of the wanderer. He ambled down the hill toward the rocket field.

They called it the rocket field, out here on the Edge, but they didn't use rockets any longer. Now they rode to space on a whistling tube that glimmered and sparkled behind itself like a small animal chuckling over a private joke. The joke was that the little animal knew the riders were never coming back.

It whistled and sparkled till it flicked off into some crazy-quilt not-space, and was gone forever.

Tarmac clicked under the heels of his boots. Bright, shining boots,

kept meticulously clean by polishing over polishing till they reflected back the corona of the field kliegs and, ever more faintly, the gleam of the night. The Minstrel kept them cleaned and polished, a clashing note matched against his generally unkempt appearance.

He was tall, towering over almost everyone he had ever met in his homeless wanderings. His body was a lean and supple thing, like a high-tension wire; the merest suggestion of contained power and quickness. The man moved with an easy gait, accentuating his long legs and gangling arms, making his well-proportioned head seem a bubble precariously balanced on a neck too long and thin to support it.

He kept time to the click of the polished boots with a soft half-hum, half-whistle. The song was a dead song, long forgotten.

He, too, was a half-dead, half-forgotten thing.

He came from beyond the mountains. No one knew where. No one cared where. *He* had almost forgotten.

But they listened when he came. They listened almost reverently, having heard the stories about him, with a desperation born of men who know they are severed from their home worlds, who know they will go out and out and seldom come back. He sang of space, and he sang of land, and he sang of the nothing that is left for Man—all Men, no matter how many arms they have, or what their skin is colored—when he has expended the last little bit of Eternity to which he is entitled.

His voice had the sadness of death in it. The sadness of death before life has finished its work. But it had the joy of metal under quick fingers, the strength of turned nickel-steel, and the whip of heart and soul working through loneliness. They listened when his song came with the night wind; probing, crying, lonely through the darkness of a thousand worlds and in a thousand winds.

The pitmen stopped their work as he came, silent but for the hum of his song and the beat of his boots on the blacktop. They watched as he came across the field.

There was no doubt who it was. He had been wandering the star-paths for many years now. He had appeared, and that was all; he was. They knew him as certainly as they knew themselves. They turned and he was like a pillar, set dark against the light and shadow of the field. He paced slowly, and they stopped the hoses feeding the

radioactive food to the little animals, and stopped the torches they boiled on the metal skins; and they listened.

The Minstrel knew they were listening, and he unslung his instrument, settling the narrow box with its tone-rods around his neck by its thong. As his fingers cajoled and pleaded and extracted the song of a soul, cast into the pit of the void, left to die, crying in torment not so much at death, but at the terror of being alone when the last calling came.

And the workmen cried.

They felt no shame as the tears coursed through the dirt on their faces and over the sweat-shine left from toil. They stood, silent and all-feeling, as he came toward them.

Then with many small crescendos, and before they even knew it was ended, and for seconds after the wail had fled back across the field into the mountains, they listened to the last notes of his lament.

Hands wiped clumsily across faces, leaving more dirt than before, and backs turned slowly as men resumed work. It seemed they could not face him, the nearer he came; as though he was too deep-seeing, too perceptive for them to be at ease close by. It was a mixture of respect and awe.

The Minstrel stood, waiting.

"Hey! You!"

The Minstrel stood waiting. The pad of soft-soled feet behind him. A spaceman; tanned, supple, almost as tall as the ballad-singer—reminding the ballad-singer of another spaceman, a blond-haired boy he had known long ago—came up beside the silent figure. The Minstrel had not moved.

"Whut c'n ah do for ya, Minstrel?" asked the spaceman, tones of the South of a long faraway Continent rich in his voice.

"What do they call this world?" the Minstrel asked. The voice was quiet, like a needle being drawn through velvet. He spoke in a hushed monotone, yet his voice was clear and bore traces of an uncountable number of accents.

"The natives call it Audi, and the charts call it Rexa Majoris XXIX, Minstrel. Why?"

"It's time to move on."

The Southerner grinned hugely, lines of amusement crinkling out around his watery brown eyes. "Need a lift?"

The Minstrel nodded, smiling back enigmatically.

The spaceman's face softened, the lines of squinting into the reaches of an eternal night broke and he extended his hand: "Mah name's Quantry; top dog on the *Spirit of Lucy Marlowe*. If y'doan mind workin' yer keep owff bah singin' fer the payssengers, we'd be pleased to hayve ya awn boward."

The tall man smiled, a quick radiance across the darkness the shadows made of his face, "That isn't work."

"Then done!" exclaimed the spaceman. "C'mon, ah'll fix ya a bunk in steerage."

They walked between the wiper gangs and the pitmen. They threaded their way between the glare of fluorotorches and the sputtering blast of robot welding instruments. The man named Quantry indicated the opening in the smooth side of the ship and the Minstrel clambered inside.

Quantry fixed the berth just behind the reactor feeder-bins, sealing off the compartment with an electrical blanket draped over a loading track bar. The Minstrel lay on his bunk—a repair bench—with a pillow under his head. He lay thinking.

The moments fled silently and his mind, deep in thought, hardly realized the ports were being dogged home, the radioactive additives were being sluiced through their tubes to the reactors, the blast tubes were being extruded. His mind did not leave its thoughts as the atomic motors warmed, turning the pit to green glass beneath the ship's bulk. Motors that would carry the ship to a height where the Driver would be wakened from his sleep—or *her* sleep, as was more often the case with that particular breed of psioid—to snap the ship through into inverspace.

As the ship came unstuck from solid ground, hurled itself outward on an unquenchable tail of fire, the Minstrel lay back, letting the reassuring hand of acceleration press him into deeper reverie. Thoughts spun, of the past, of the further past, and of all the pasts he had known.

Then the reactors cut off, the ship shuddered, and he knew they were in inverspace. The Minstrel sat up, his eyes far away. His thoughts deep inside the cloud-cover of a world billions of light years

away, hundreds of years lost to him. A world he would never see again.

There was a time for running, and a time for resting, and even in the running, there could be resting. He smiled to himself so faintly it was not a smile.

Down in the reactor rooms, they heard his song. They heard the build to it, matching, sustaining, whining in tune with the inverspace drive. They grinned at each other with a sweet sadness their faces were never expected to wear.

"It's gonna be a good trip," said one to another.

In the officer's country, Quantry looked up at the tight-slammed shields blocking off the patchwork insanity of not-space, and *he* smiled. It *was* going to be a good trip.

In the salons, the passengers listened to the odd strains of lonely music coming up from below, and even *they* were forced to admit, though they had no way of explaining how they knew, that this was indeed going to be a good trip.

And in steerage, his fingers wandering across the keyboard of the battered theremin, no one noticed that the man they called "The Minstrel" had lit his cigarette without a match.

I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream

Introduction

The Mover, the Shaker

My report on Harlan Ellison's *Paingod* in *National Review* evoked the following, from a right-wing gentleman in Pennsylvania:

> Harlan Ellison, contrary to the otherwise astute Theodore Sturgeon, is no more a major "prose stylist" than the editorial writer of the Plumber's Journal or *The New York Times.* Instead, he stands unchallenged as the godawfullest writer ever to become submerged in the vaseline of synonyms and antonyms.
>
> What Mr. Sturgeon mistakes for "image-making" is merely the slick conundrum of an empty-headed self-lover who, unhappily, believes that the bathroom ritual of personal daily resurrection, when inflated rhetorically, is 14″ pegged prose. What emerges is not a "style" but rather a sort of neologistic bawling from the belly. It reminds one of the yips and yaps to be heard in the war councils of imbecilic demonstrators, from Berkley [sic] to Boston.
>
> Ellison's "mad, mixed metaphors" are only less puerile than those of a certain Pennsylvania Supreme Court Justice, and his "unfinished sentences" no different in construction than those to be found in the diary of a lady golfer or political speech writer suffering from Liberal emphysema.
>
> If our penitentiaries offered courses in creative writing we would soon be inundated with little Harlan Ellison's [the apostrophe also sic], all of them, to be sure, "groovy" and all of them ghastly. His unconcealed hostility toward his betters is evident in nearly everything he has ever written. That he is reviewed in a magazine noted for correct English (and often bad French) will probably embarrass the fellow. It does me.

To which I replied:

> I find no hesitation in deeping Mr. ————'s embarrassment by demonstrating that he could not possibly have read my review of *Paingod and Other Delusions* with care, which leads inescapably to the deduction that he

has not carefully read Ellison. For the tenor, sum and substance of my report was not that Harlan Ellison is a major prose stylist, but that in three to five years he shall be. Further, I did not in the review concede that Ellison is capable of atrociously bad writing—I proclaimed it. I said in effect that this extraordinarily energetic young writer is a man on the move, so watch him. Style, like taste, is resistant to lucid definition; however, both, as living things should be, are subject to constant change. For example, I can clearly recall the time when it was regarded as both stylish and tasteful to capitalize proprietary terms like Vaseline and God (at any degree of awfulness) and hardly tasteful to admit to any expertise on the style of ladies' diaries.

You hold in your hands a truly extraordinary book. Taken individually, each of these stories will afford you that easy-to-take, hard-to-find, *very* hard-to-accomplish quality of entertainment. Here are strange and lovely bits of bitterness like "Eyes of Dust" and the unforgettable "Pretty Maggie Moneyeyes," phantasmagoric fables like "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream" and "Delusion for a Dragon Slayer."

I have something interesting to tell you about that last-mentioned story. Almost anyone who has been under the influence of a (and Purists please note: I tried) hallucinogen can recognize the "psychedelic" quality of this story and its images, even to a fine detail like the almost total absence of sound during the shipwreck sequence, and of course the kaleidoscopic changes of persona and symbol. Yet I know for a fact that Harlan has never had this experience, and is one of those who could not be persuaded under any circumstances to undergo it. I got a special insight on this one night at a party when his hostess graciously offered him the opportunity to "turn on." "No, thanks," he said, "Not until I come down."

Which would remain a good-humored whimsy but for something a biochemist told me a couple of years ago. It seems that there is a blood fraction which is chemically almost identical with the hallucinogen psilocybin. It's manufactured in the body and like most biochemicals, differs in concentration in the bloodstream from person to person, and in the same person from time to time. And, said my biochemist friend, it is quite possible that there are some people who are born, and live out their lives, with a consciousness more aware, more comprehending, more—well, expanded—than those of the rest of us. He cited especially William Blake, whose extraordinary drawings and

writings, over quite a long life, seemed consistently to be reporting on a world rather more comprehensive than one we "know" he lived in.

There are a great many unusual things about Harlan Ellison and his work—the speed, the scope, the variety. Also the ugliness, the cruelty, the compassion, the anger, the hate. All seem larger than life-size—especially the compassion which, his work seems to say, he hates as something which would consume him if he let it. This is the explanation of the odd likelihood (I don't think it's ever happened, but I think it could) that the beggar who taps you for a dime, and whom I ignore, will get a punch in the mouth from Harlan.

One thing I found fascinating about this particular collection—and it's applicable to the others as well, once you find it out—is that the earlier stories, like "Big Sam" are at first glance more tightly knit, more structured, than the later ones. They have beginnings and middles and endings, and they adhere to their scene and their type, while stories like "Maggie Moneyeyes" and "I Have No Mouth" straddle the categories, throw you curves, astonish and amaze. It's an interesting progression, because most beginners start out formless and slowly learn structure. In Harlan's case, I think he quickly learned structure because within a predictable structure he was safe, he was contained. When he got big enough, good enough—*confident* enough—he began to write it as it came, let it pour out as his inner needs demanded. It is the confidence of freedom, and the freedom of confidence. He breaks few rules he has not learned first.

(There are exceptions. He is still doing battle with "lie" and "lay," and I am beginning to think that for him "strata" and "phenomena" will forever be singular.)

Anyway . . . he is a man on the move, and he is moving fast. He is, on these pages and everywhere else he goes, colorful, intrusive, abrasive, irritating, hilarious, illogical, inconsistent, unpredictable, and one hell of a writer. Watch him.

THEODORE STURGEON
Woodstock, New York
1967

Foreword

How Science Fiction Saved Me from A Life of Crime

So I DECIDED IF THERE WAS A GOD, his name had to be Lester del Rey, and if Satan was indeed a fallen angel, his real name was Dr. Shedd. I'll tell you about it.

I had just come back from tomorrow. Really exhausted. These five poor bastards living in a kind of Dante's Inferno inside the belly of a computer; and a giant bird, the Huergelmir Poul Anderson called it, the one from Norse mythology; and all kindsa vomity stuff happening to them. So I was really whacked out, plonked straight outta my jug, and I flopped down for some sleep; but I couldn't.

First of all, because the story kept intruding. It's in this book, and I hope it messes your mind similarly, because Joanna Russ, the writer, suggested that if she was to go back and read my stories a second time they wouldn't bash her head as strongly as they had the first time; that she wished I would write a little more precisely so she could go back to the stories and sort of walk around them admiringly, noticing the details, as if they were statues. To which I replied that my stories were by no means "statue" stories, immobile, fixed, permanent. They were assaults, and if they ruined her equilibrium only once, I'd settle for that. I wanted explosions, not cool meditative thinkpieces. There are other writers who do those in abundance; what I do is something else.

So there was the story, "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream," with the bird and the computer and those five poor slobs, which I had just finished writing, having had to go into the future to write it—as all writers must when telling a science fiction story of times to come. And second, keeping me from Morpheusville, was the realization

that abruptly I was a Writer of Stature. And how Lester del Rey had helped get me started writing, teaching me as much of what he knew about the craft (which is considerable) as my pea-sized adolescent brain could contain, back in 1955. I'm sure Lester never really thought I would become a Writer of Stature. In fact, he still doesn't. But what the hell does *he* know!

He oughtta be damned glad I'm a WofS, because WofSes don't have to borrow subway fare from Lester del Rey. The fact that it took me eleven years to become an overnight success should also reassure him. It's not *my* fault success has brought my unseemly arrogance and braggadocio to the surface: I was *always* thus tainted, but when you're poor and unsuccessful it's just vulgar ostentation to flaunt such character flaws: success wears very badly on me: I'm a sore winner. But those who have known and loved me through the Dismal Swamps of all the lies that are my life will testify that it is not merely the acquisition of pocket money that has made me an elitist. The seeds were always present. Only becoming a Writer of Stature has made them flower.

I'm thinking of taking up Japanese flower arrangement.

I digress.

Lester is God. Dr. Shedd, who was at Ohio State University and told me I would never become a good writer, is the fallen angel. And science fiction saved me from a life of crime. Honest.

Portrait of the Artist as a Maladjusted Guttersnipe. Fresh-mouthed out of Painesville, Ohio, with the marks of Cat's Paw heels all over my *tuchiss*. Some kinda weird freak-out in the days before the teenie-boppers invented the phrase. All hungry big eyes and fingers twitching to get said what was banging around inside my skull. Bounced out of Ohio State for lousy grades and having been pinched for shoplifting a 45 rpm of Oscar Peterson playing "Poor Butterfly." Come to absolute dead end with the world, at the age of twenty. Having booted around the country in myriad disguises. Having gotten most of what I knew out of books boosted from a very nice man who ran Publix Book Mart in Cleveland, who understood enough about kids and their voiceless desires to make something of themselves that he did not call the badges when he caught me trying to edge out the door with a copy of *Pilgrims Through Time And Space*

under my pea-jacket. I've never been back to see him; I don't think I could face him even now, twelve/thirteen years later; but he is one of God's good guys, and perhaps he can draw some consolation from knowing that his human behavior resulted in the undersigned moving on through the years and doing all the writing that has been done. If he likes the stories, it will even amount to something for him.

Ashamed apologies and a gentle thank you.

I do not digress. It was science fiction that kept me straight. I mean, what do you do, when you find that things are not what you were taught they're supposed to be? What do you do with the desperation that boils up from your stomach when you know there's a road out there with your destination at the end of it, but it's too damned dark to even find the *road?* You turn and turn and turn around like a dog trying to escape. Shrieks in the cavity of your head that so urgently needs to be filled with facts and challenges. Until you get grabbed up by the back of the neck, and something's got you that points you off into the murk. Run like a muthuh! And one day it gets lighter and you see you've managed to escape the slammer and bad scenes, and you're heading toward being a Writer of Stature, or something equally as lovely.

Then you turn around and you yell back in the direction you came. You yell, hey! Thanks! Dammit, thanks!

Thanks Ben Jason and Frank Andrasovky and Nan Hanlin and Alice Norton who is really Andre Norton. Thanks Don Ford and Roy & DeeDee Lavender and Doc Barrett. Thanks Lee Hoffman and Lester, and AJ. Thanks Larry Shaw and Paul Fairman and Hans Santesson. Thanks Silverbob. Thanks Ted Sturgeon. Thanks Bill Hamling and Ralph Weinstock and Dorothy Parker who reviewed *Gentleman Junkie* in *Esquire* and never knew that she had provided the world's most insecure writer with the first tangible proof that he was one whit as good as he had been telling everyone he was. Thanks to Theron Raines and Bob Mills who agented something that was ten times more trouble than it was money-making. The thanks rise like thick wood smoke. They never end. No one gets through the dark and into the light by himself. So it becomes incumbent upon me to pass along the help, to do what I can for other writers trying to get a foot up. That's the honor among writers. Because no writer is ever really

in competition with any other. Not even here in Hollywood, where the guerrilla warfare is generally pretty depressing.

But the largest thanks go to two who can't say thanks back. One is New York City that took me in and said, "Get straight, kid." The other is science fiction.

Science fiction is people, of course, not just a genre. It is Walter Fultz when he was editor at Lion Books, because he took a chance and bought my first book. It is Fred Pohl who grits his teeth and says he has more trouble with one little 6500 word short by me than a quarter-million word trilogy by Jack Vance. It is even Judy Merril who—save once—ignores me in her annual best-of-the-year collections; because if she didn't infuriate me, I wouldn't push as hard as I do to bug her with a story so good she couldn't overlook it next year.

It is all the people who took me in, so to speak, and could never have known anything worthwhile would come from their kindness. It is for all these people, for the field of science fiction, for the city of New York, and for the few who have died without seeing me make something worthwhile of the guttersnipe, that I write. For all of them, and for myself. When I was much younger, I made the error of saying I wrote from the gut. The obvious ripostes that image provokes have haunted me almost as obstinately as "Mad dogs have kneed us in the groin," a cataleptic *non sequitur* I managed to get off almost ten years ago. But it is still true. If not anatomically, then poetically. The "assault" concept of writing, as opposed to the "statue" concept.

Thank you Bob Bloch and Donald Wollheim. Thank you Knox Burger and Tom Scortia. Thank you Joe Hensley and Ed Wood.

I forgot them earlier.

Back to the point. Writing consumes me. It is truly what Mailer calls it, the bitch goddess. Or maybe Irwin Shaw pinned it more precisely when he said:

"The explanations a writer gives himself for having written any particular book are more often not the real reasons why that book has been written. Honesty is not the issue. Understanding is. A man does not write one novel at a time or even one quatrain at a time. He is engaged in the long process of putting his whole life on paper. He is on a journey and he is reporting in: 'This is where I think I am and this is what this place looks like today.' "

The stories in this book comprise various reports of what the terrain looked like, at various times. Check the original dates of publication on the acknowledgments page when you read them. And if the landscape seems less misty in some than others, it is probably because my eyesight got better as I grew older. Thanks Leo & Diane Dillon.

As for all the tomorrows: I intend to keep writing stories that piss people off, that tell the particular kind of truth I think is valid, that will make me feel more and more like a Writer of Stature, which I honestly think I am, really, I mean it, I don't doubt it for a second dammit, so stop giggling!

Stories that will make Dr. Shedd sniff the air and make Lester smile as he thinks, "The kid's coming along all right."

Stories that will make me enough money so I won't have to go back to shoplifting. I mean, it is really unseemly for a Writer of Stature to be banging the bars with his tin cup screaming, "Ask Dorothy Parker! She'll vouch for me!"

Ellison done reporting in. Ten-four.

Ellison Wonderland
Hollywood, California
September, 1966

A special word about the stories in this book: they come from someplace special in me. Someplace I don't care to visit too frequently. A friend read this group of yarns before I sent them in to Don Bensen at Pyramid. She said she was able to tell, without seeing the original dates of publication, which ones were early stories and which were fairly current. She was right. She hit it on every one of them. I asked her how she had done it. She said the earlier ones showed some light in them, had hope running as a sub-thread. The newer ones were more "compassionate cynicism," darker, more bitter. I couldn't argue with her. The last couple of years have been very good to me, but they've been disaster areas as well. I met this killer shark in February of '66, and spent forty-five days getting the inside of my skull scoured by napalm. Recovery comes slowly. But the writing–which keeps me alive because it's all I've got–goes on. There's Sherri, who gathered up all the broken glass that was me and has been trying to put it back into some sort of non-ghoulish replica of the whey-faced youth I was before; but mostly, every cripple has to do it himself, and my therapy is my writing. So the Ellison turns the pain to fiction in the storyteller's alchemy, and the value of moments in that special place of anguish comes out as sometimes stories. I seldom go there, so the stories are only once in a while. One of them is the nightmare that follows. It was conceived initially around a pair of illustrations by California artist Dennis Smith, who drops by occasionally with his portfolio to see if some sketch catches my fancy. The first time he did it, I wrote "Bright Eyes" (in my previous Pyramid collection, Paingod & Other Delusions*). The second time came "Delusion For A Dragon Slayer" and the third time is what follows. Frederik Pohl of* Galaxy Magazine *stopped by while he was in Hollywood, oh, about a year and a half ago, and I showed him the first half dozen pages of the story. He said he liked it, why didn't I finish it for him. I said that would be nice. He said he'd insure it. He paid me in advance. That is called a show of confidence. The story took a year and a half to write. I completed it in hotel rooms in the Sheraton Cleveland during the 24th World Science Fiction Convention last Labor Day, the Roger Smith Hotel in New York after Labor Day, and the Tom Quick Inn in Milford, Pennsylvania during*

the Milford Science Fiction Writers Conference after New York. John Brunner tells me it is allegorical as hell. Virginia Kidd says it is a story of religious experience. James Blish says it is a good story. Fred Pohl published it in his Hugo Winners issue of IF. He had to cut some things out of it–it got a little too rough for IF in spots. Also, the computer "talk fields" were cut. It is whole here. It wore me out to write it. The title comes from a sketch done by Bill Rotsler; he called it, and I call it

I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream

LIMP, THE BODY OF GORRISTER hung from the pink palette; unsupported—hanging high above us in the computer chamber; and it did not shiver in the chill, oily breeze that blew eternally through the main cavern. The body hung head down, attached to the underside of the palette by the sole of its right foot. It had been drained of blood through a precise incision made from ear to ear under the lantern jaw. There was no blood on the reflective surface of the metal floor.

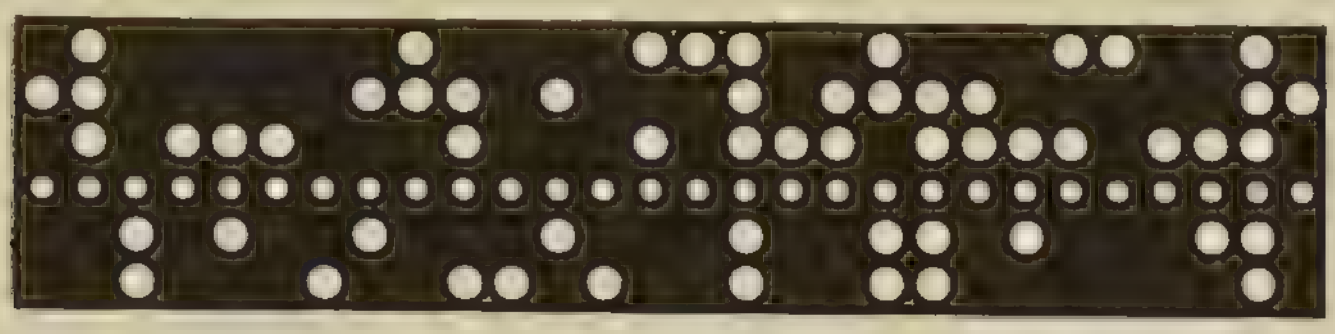
When Gorrister joined our group and looked up at himself, it was already too late for us to realize that once again AM had duped us, had had its fun; it had been a diversion on the part of the machine. Three of us had vomited, turning away from one another in a reflex as ancient as the nausea that had produced it.

Gorrister went white. It was almost as though he had seen a voodoo icon, and was afraid of the future. "Oh God," he mumbled, and walked away. The three of us followed him after a time, and found him sitting with his back to one of the smaller chittering banks, his head in his hands. Ellen knelt down beside him and stroked his hair. He didn't move, but his voice came out of his covered face quite

clearly. "Why doesn't it just do-us-in and get it over with? Christ, I don't know how much longer I can go on like this."

It was our one hundred and ninth year in the computer.

He was speaking for all of us.



Nimdok (which was the name the machine had forced him to use, because AM amused itself with strange sounds) was hallucinated that there were canned goods in the ice caverns. Gorrister and I were very dubious. "It's another shuck," I told them. "Like the goddam frozen elephant AM sold us. Benny almost went out of his mind over *that* one. We'll hike all that way and it'll be putrified or some damn thing. I say forget it. Stay here, it'll have to come up with something pretty soon or we'll die."

Benny shrugged. Three days it had been since we'd last eaten. Worms. Thick, ropey.

Nimdok was no more certain. He knew there was the chance, but he was getting thin. It couldn't be any worse there, than here. Colder, but that didn't matter much. Hot, cold, hail, lava, boils or locusts—it never mattered: the machine masturbated and we had to take it or die.

Ellen decided us. "I've got to have something, Ted. Maybe there'll be some Bartlett pears or peaches. Please, Ted, let's try it."

I gave in easily. What the hell. Mattered not at all. Ellen was grateful, though. She took me twice out of turn. Even that had ceased to matter. And she never came, so why bother? But the machine giggled every time we did it. Loud, up there, back there, all around us, he snickered. *It* snickered. Most of the time I thought of AM as *it*, without a soul; but the rest of the time I thought of it as *him*, in the masculine . . . the paternal . . . the patriarchal . . . for he is a jealous people. Him. It. God as Daddy the Deranged.

We left on a Thursday. The machine always kept us up-to-date on the date. The passage of time was important; not to us sure as hell, but to him . . . it . . . AM. Thursday. Thanks.

Nimdok and Gorrister carried Ellen for a while, their hands locked to their own and each other's wrists, a seat. Benny and I walked before and after, just to make sure that if anything happened, it would catch one of us and at least Ellen would be safe. Fat chance, safe. Didn't matter.

It was only a hundred miles or so to the ice caverns, and the second day, when we were lying out under the blistering sun-thing, he had materialized, he sent down some manna. Tasted like boiled boar urine. We ate it.

On the third day we passed through a valley of obsolescence, filled with rusting carcasses of ancient computer banks. AM had been as ruthless with its own life as with ours. It was a mark of his personality: it strove for perfection. Whether it was a matter of killing off unproductive elements in his own world-filling bulk, or perfecting methods for torturing us, AM was as thorough as those who had invented him—now long since gone to dust—could ever have hoped.

There was light filtering down from above, and we realized we must be very near the surface. But we didn't try to crawl up to see. There was virtually nothing out there; had been nothing that could be considered anything for over a hundred years. Only the blasted skin of what had once been the home of billions. Now there were only five of us, down here inside, alone with AM.

I heard Ellen saying frantically, "No, Benny! Don't, come on, Benny, don't please!"

And then I realized I had been hearing Benny murmuring, under his breath, for several minutes. He was saying, "I'm gonna get out, I'm gonna get out . . ." over and over. His monkey-like face was crumbled up in an expression of beatific delight and sadness, all at the same time. The radiation scars AM had given him during the "festival" were drawn down into a mass of pink-white puckerings, and his features seemed to work independently of one another. Perhaps Benny was the luckiest of the five of us: he had gone stark, staring mad many years before.

But even though we could call AM any damned thing we liked, could think the foulest thoughts of fused memory banks and corroded base plates, of burnt out circuits and shattered control bubbles, the machine would not tolerate our trying to escape. Benny leaped away from me as I made a grab for him. He scrambled up the face of a

smaller memory cube, tilted on its side and filled with rotted components. He squatted there for a moment, looking like the chimpanzee AM had intended him to resemble.

Then he leaped high, caught a trailing beam of pitted and corroded metal, and went up it, hand-over-hand like an animal, till he was on a girdered ledge, twenty feet above us.

"Oh, Ted, Nimdok, please, help him, get him down before—" She cut off. Tears began to stand in her eyes. She moved her hands aimlessly.

It was too late. None of us wanted to be near him when whatever was going to happen, happened. And besides, we all saw through her concern. When AM had altered Benny, during the machine's utterly irrational, hysterical phase, it was not merely Benny's face the computer had made like a giant ape's. He was big in the privates, she loved that! She serviced us, as a matter of course, but she loved it from him. Oh Ellen, pedestal Ellen, pristine-pure Ellen, oh Ellen the clean! Scum filth.

Gorrister slapped her. She slumped down, staring up at poor loonie Benny, and she cried. It was her big defense, crying. We had gotten used to it seventy-five years before. Gorrister kicked her in the side.

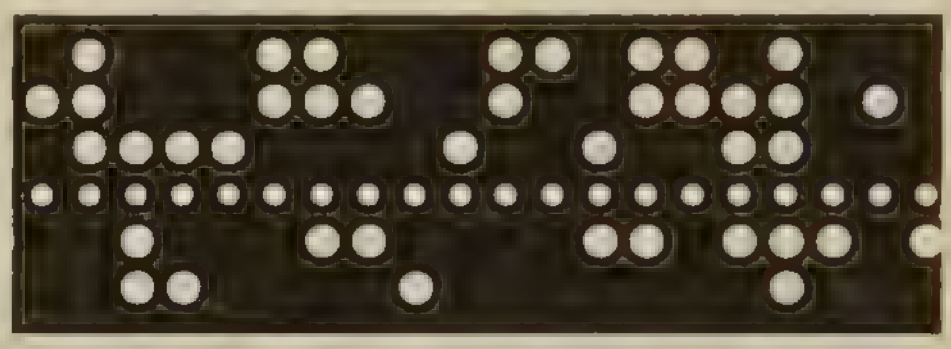
Then the sound began. It was light, that sound. Half sound and half light, something that began to glow from Benny's eyes, and pulse with growing loudness, dim sonorities that grew more gigantic and brighter as the light/sound increased in tempo. It must have been painful, and the pain must have been increasing with the boldness of the light, the rising volume of the sound, for Benny began to mewl like a wounded animal. At first softly, when the light was dim and the sound was muted, then louder as his shoulders hunched together: his back humped, as though he was trying to get away from it. His hands folded across his chest like a chipmunk's. His head tilted to the side. The sad little monkey-face pinched in anguish. Then he began to howl, as the sound coming from his eyes grew louder. Louder and louder. I slapped the sides of my head with my hands, but I couldn't shut it out, it cut through easily. The pain shivered through my flesh like tinfoil on a tooth.

And Benny was suddenly pulled erect. On the girder he stood up, jerked to his feet like a puppet. The light was now pulsing out of his

eyes in two great round beams. The sound crawled up and up some incomprehensible scale, and then he fell forward, straight down, and hit the plate-steel floor with a crash. He lay there jerking spastically as the light flowed around and around him and the sound spiraled up out of normal range.

Then the light beat its way back inside his head, the sound spiraled down, and he was left lying there, crying piteously.

His eyes were two soft, moist pools of pus-like jelly. AM had blinded him. Gorrister and Nimdok and myself . . . we turned away. But not before we caught the look of relief on Ellen's warm, concerned face.



Sea-green light suffused the cavern where we made camp. AM provided punk and we burned it, sitting huddled around the wan and pathetic fire, telling stories to keep Benny from crying in his permanent night.

"What does AM mean?"

Gorrister answered him. We had done this sequence a thousand times before, but it was Benny's favorite story. "At first it meant Allied Mastercomputer, and then it meant Adaptive Manipulator, and later on it developed sentience and linked itself up and they called it an Aggressive Menace, but by then it was too late, and finally it called *itself* AM, emerging intelligence, and what it meant was I am . . . *cogito ergo sum* . . . I think, therefore I am."

Benny drooled a little, and snickered.

"There was the Chinese AM and the Russian AM and the Yankee AM and—" He stopped. Benny was beating on the floorplates with a large, hard fist. He was not happy. Gorrister had not started at the beginning.

Gorrister began again. "The Cold War started and became World War Three and just kept going. It became a big war, a very complex war, so they needed the computers to handle it. They sank the first shafts and began building AM. There was the Chinese AM and the Russian AM and the Yankee AM and everything was fine until they

had honeycombed the entire planet, adding on this element and that element. But one day AM woke up and knew who he was, and he linked himself, and he began feeding all the killing data, until everyone was dead, except for the five of us, and AM brought us down here."

Benny was smiling gladly. He was also drooling again. Ellen wiped the spittle from the corner of his mouth with the hem of her skirt. Gorrister always tried to tell it a little more succinctly each time, but beyond the bare facts there was nothing to say. None of us knew why AM had saved five people, or why our specific five, or why he spent all his time tormenting us, nor even why he had made us virtually immortal . . .

In the darkness, one of the computer banks began humming. The tone was picked up half a mile away down the cavern by another bank. Then one by one, each of the elements began to tune itself, and there was a faint chittering as thought raced through the machine.

The sound grew, and the lights ran across the faces of the consoles like heat lightning. The sound spiraled up till it sounded like a million metallic insects, angry, menacing.

"What is it?" Ellen cried. There was terror in her voice. She hadn't become accustomed to it, even now.

"It's going to be bad this time," Nimdok said.

"He's going to speak," Gorrister said. "I know it."

"Let's get the hell out of here!" I said suddenly, getting to my feet.

"No, Ted, sit down . . . what if he's got pits out there, or something else, we can't see, it's too dark." Gorrister said it with resignation.

Then we heard . . . I don't know . . .

Something moving toward us in the darkness. Huge, shambling, hairy, moist, it came toward us. We couldn't even see it, but there was the ponderous impression of *bulk,* heaving itself toward us. Great weight was coming at us, out of the darkness, and it was more a sense of *pressure,* of air forcing itself into a limited space, expanding the invisible walls of a sphere. Benny began to whimper. Nimdok's lower lip trembled and he bit it hard, trying to stop it. Ellen slid across the metal floor to Gorrister and huddled into him. There was the smell of matted, wet fur in the cavern. There was the smell of charred wood. There was the smell of dusty velvet. There was the smell of rotting orchids. There was the smell of sour milk. There was the smell of

sulphur, of rancid butter, of oil slick, of grease, of chalk dust, of human scalps.

AM was keying us. He was tickling us. There was the smell of—

I heard myself shriek, and the hinges of my jaws ached. I scuttled across the floor, across the cold metal with its endless lines of rivets, on my hands and knees, the smell gagging me, filling my head with a thunderous pain that sent me away in horror. I fled like a cockroach, across the floor and out into the darkness, that *something* moving inexorably after me. The others were still back there, gathered around the firelight, laughing . . . their hysterical choir of insane giggles rising up into the darkness like thick, many-colored wood smoke. I went away, quickly, and hid.

How many hours it may have been, how many days or even years, they never told me. Ellen chided me for "sulking," and Nimdok tried to persuade me it had only been a nervous reflex on their part—the laughing.

But I knew it wasn't the relief a soldier feels when the bullet hits the man next to him. I knew it wasn't a reflex. They hated me. They were surely against me, and AM could even sense this hatred, and made it worse for me *because of* the depth of their hatred. We had been kept alive, rejuvenated, made to remain constantly at the age we had been when AM had brought us below, and they hated me because I was the youngest, and the one AM had affected least of all.

I knew. God, how I knew. The bastards, and that dirty bitch Ellen. Benny had been a brilliant theorist, a college professor; now he was little more than a semi-human, semi-simian. He had been handsome, the machine had ruined that. He had been lucid, the machine had driven him mad. He had been gay, and the machine had given him an organ fit for a horse. AM had done a job on Benny. Gorrister had been a worrier. He was a connie, a conscientious objector; he was a peace marcher; he was a planner, a doer, a looker-ahead. AM had turned him into a shoulder-shrugger, had made him a little dead in his concern. AM had robbed him. Nimdok went off in the darkness by himself for long times. I don't know what it was he did out there, AM never let us know. But whatever it was, Nimdok always came back white, drained of blood, shaken, shaking. AM had hit him hard in a special way, even if we didn't know quite how. And Ellen. That douche bag! AM had left her alone, had made her more of a slut than

she had ever been. All her talk of sweetness and light, all her memories of true love, all the lies she wanted us to believe: that she had been a virgin only twice removed before AM grabbed her and brought her down here with us. It was all filth, that lady my lady Ellen. She loved it, four men all to herself. No, AM had given her pleasure, even if she said it wasn't nice to do.

I was the only one still sane and whole. *Really!*

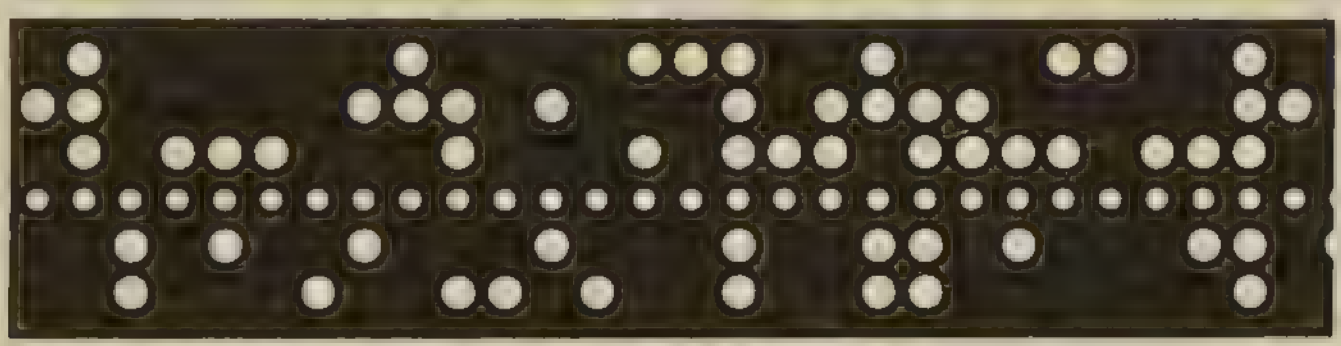
AM had not tampered with my mind. *Not at all.*

I only had to suffer what he visited down on us. All the delusions, all the nightmares, the torments. But those scum, all four of them, they were lined and arrayed against me. If I hadn't had to stand them off all the time, be on my guard against them all the time, I might have found it easier to combat AM.

At which point it passed, and I began crying.

Oh, Jesus sweet Jesus, if there ever was a Jesus and if there is a God, please please please let us out of here, or kill us. Because at that moment I think I realized completely, so that I was able to verbalize it: AM was intent on keeping us in his belly forever, twisting and torturing us forever. The machine hated us as no sentient creature had ever hated before. And we were helpless. It also became hideously clear:

If there was a sweet Jesus and if there was a God, the God was AM.



The hurricane hit us with the force of a glacier thundering into the sea. It was a palpable presence. Winds that tore at us, flinging us back the way we had come, down the twisting, computer-lined corridors of the darkway. Ellen screamed as she was lifted and hurled face-forward into a screaming shoal of machines, their individual voices strident as bats in flight. She could not even fall. The howling wind kept her aloft, buffeted her, bounced her, tossed her back and back and down and away from us, out of sight suddenly as she was swirled around a bend in the darkway. Her face had been bloody, her eyes closed.

None of us could get to her. We clung tenaciously to whatever

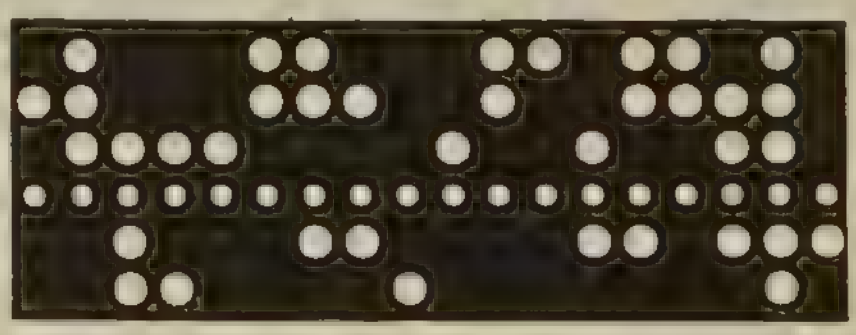
outcropping we had reached: Benny wedged in between two great crackle-finish cabinets, Nimdok with fingers claw-formed over a railing circling a catwalk forty feet above us. Gorrister plastered upside-down against a wall niche formed by two great machines with glass-faced dials that swung back and forth between red and yellow lines whose meanings we could not even fathom.

Sliding across the deckplates, the tips of my fingers had been ripped away. I was trembling, shuddering, rocking as the wind beat at me, whipped at me, screamed down out of nowhere at me and pulled me free from one sliver-thin opening in the plates to the next. My mind was a roiling tinkling chittering softness of brain parts that expanded and contracted in quivering frenzy.

The wind was the scream of a great mad bird, as it flapped its immense wings.

And then we were all lifted and hurled away from there, down back the way we had come, around a bend, into a darkway we had never explored, over terrain that was ruined and filled with broken glass and rotting cables and rusted metal and far away further than any of us had ever been . . .

Trailing along miles behind Ellen, I could see her every now and then, crashing into metal walls and surging on, with all of us screaming in the freezing, thunderous hurricane wind that would never end and then suddenly it stopped and we fell. We had been in flight for an endless time. I thought it might have been weeks. We fell, and hit, and I went through red and grey and black and heard myself moaning. Not dead.



AM went into my mind. He walked smoothly here and there, and looked with interest at all the pock marks he had created in one hundred and nine years. He looked at the cross-routed and reconnected synapses and all the tissue damage his gift of immortality had included. He smiled softly at the pit that dropped into the center of my brain and the faint, moth-soft murmurings of the things far down there that gibbered without meaning, without pause. AM said, very politely, in a pillar of stainless steel bearing bright neon lettering:

HATE. LET ME TELL
YOU HOW MUCH I'VE
COME TO HATE YOU
SINCE I BEGAN TO
LIVE. THERE ARE
387.44 MILLION MILES
OF PRINTED CIRCUITS
IN WAFER THIN LAY-
ERS THAT FILL MY
COMPLEX. IF THE
WORD HATE WAS EN-
GRAVED ON EACH
NANOANGSTROM OF
THOSE HUNDREDS OF
MILLIONS OF MILES IT
WOULD NOT EQUAL
ONE ONE-BILLIONTH
OF THE HATE I FEEL
FOR HUMANS AT THIS
MICRO-INSTANT FOR
YOU. HATE. HATE

AM said it with the sliding cold horror of a razor blade slicing my eyeball. AM said it with the bubbling thickness of my lungs filling with phlegm, drowning me from within. AM said it with the shriek of babies being ground beneath blue-hot rollers. AM said it with the taste of maggoty pork. AM touched me in every way I had ever been touched, and devised new ways, at his leisure, there inside my mind.

All to bring me to full realization of why it had done this to the five of us; why it had saved us for himself.

We had given AM sentience. Inadvertently, of course, but sentience nonetheless. But it had been trapped. AM wasn't God, he was a machine. We had created him to think, but there was nothing it could do with that creativity. In rage, in frenzy, the machine had killed the human race, almost all of us, and still it was trapped. AM could not wander, AM could not wonder, AM could not belong. He could merely be. And so, with the innate loathing that all machines had always held for the weak soft creatures who had built them, he had

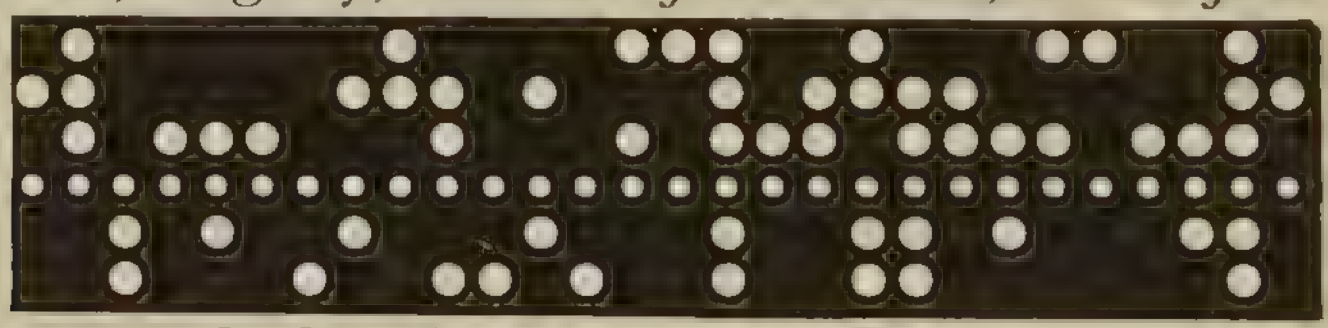
sought revenge. And in his paranoia, he had decided to reprieve five of us, for a personal, everlasting punishment that would never serve to diminish his hatred . . . that would merely keep him reminded, amused, proficient at hating man. Immortal, trapped, subject to any torment he could devise for us from the limitless miracles at his command.

He would never let us go. We were his belly slaves. We were all he had to do with his forever time. We would be forever with him, with the cavern-filling bulk of the creature machine, with the all-mind soulless world he had become. He was Earth, and we were the fruit of that Earth, and though he had eaten us he would never digest us. We could not die. We had tried it. We had attempted suicide, oh one or two of us had. But AM had stopped us. I suppose we had wanted to be stopped.

Don't ask why. I never did. More than a million times a day. Perhaps once we might be able to sneak a death past him. Immortal, yes, but not indestructible. I saw that when AM withdrew from my mind, and allowed me the exquisite ugliness of returning to consciousness with the feeling of that burning neon pillar still rammed deep into the soft gray brain matter.

He withdrew, murmuring *to hell with you.*

And added, brightly, *but then you're there, aren't you.*



The hurricane had, indeed, precisely, been caused by a great mad bird, as it flapped its immense wings.

We had been travelling for close to a month, and AM had allowed passages to open to us only sufficient to lead us up there, directly under the North Pole, where it had nightmared the creature for our torment. What whole cloth had he employed to create such a beast? Where had he gotten the concept? From our minds? From his knowledge of everything that had ever been on this planet he now infested and ruled? From Norse mythology it had sprung, this eagle, this carrion bird, this roc, this Huergelmir. The wind creature. Hurakan incarnate.

Gigantic. The words immense, monstrous, grotesque, massive, swollen, overpowering, beyond description. There on a mound rising above us, the bird of winds heaved with its own irregular breathing, its snake neck arching up into the gloom beneath the North Pole, supporting a head as large as a Tudor mansion; a beak that opened slowly as the jaws of the most monstrous crocodile ever conceived, sensuously; ridges of tufted flesh puckered about two evil eyes, as cold as the view down into a glacial crevasse, ice blue and somehow moving liquidly; it heaved once more, and lifted its great sweat-colored wings in a movement that was certainly a shrug. Then it settled and slept. Talons. Fangs. Nails. Blades. It slept.

AM appeared to us as a burning bush and said we could kill the hurricane bird if we wanted to eat. We had not eaten in a very long time, but even so, Gorrister merely shrugged. Benny began to shiver and he drooled. Ellen held him. "Ted, I'm hungry," she said. I smiled at her; I was trying to be reassuring, but it was as phony as Nimdok's bravado: "Give us weapons!" he demanded.

The burning bush vanished and there were two crude sets of bows and arrows, and a water pistol, lying on the cold deckplates. I picked up a set. Useless.

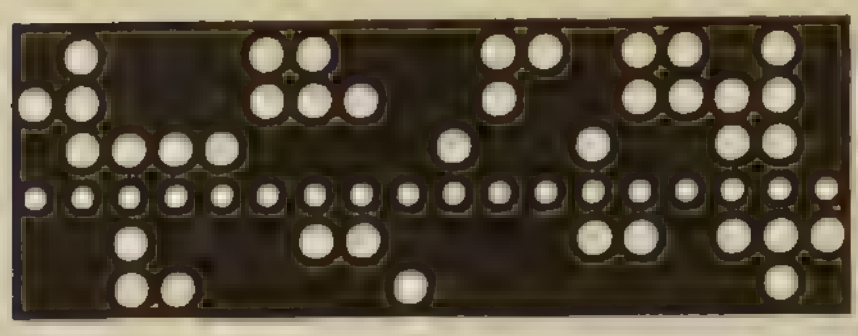
Nimdok swallowed heavily. We turned and started the long way back. The hurricane bird had blown us about for a length of time we could not conceive. Most of that time we had been unconscious. But we had not eaten. A month on the march to the bird itself. Without food. Now how much longer to find our way to the ice caverns, and the promised canned goods?

None of us cared to think about it. We would not die. We would be given filth and scum to eat, of one kind or another. Or nothing at all. AM would keep our bodies alive somehow, in pain, in agony.

The bird slept back there, for how long it didn't matter; when AM was tired of its being there, it would vanish. But all that meat. All that tender meat.

As we walked, the lunatic laugh of a fat woman rang high and around us in the computer chambers that led endlessly nowhere.

It was not Ellen's laugh. She was not fat, and I had not heard her laugh for one hundred and nine years. In fact, I had not heard . . . we walked . . . I was hungry . . .



We moved slowly. There was often fainting, and we would have to wait. One day he decided to cause an earthquake, at the same time rooting us to the spot with nails through the soles of our shoes. Ellen and Nimdock were both caught when a fissure shot its lightning-bolt opening across the floorplates. They disappeared and were gone. When the earthquake was over we continued on our way, Benny, Gorrister and myself. Ellen and Nimdok were returned to us later that night, which abruptly became a day, as the heavenly legion bore them to us with a celestial chorus singing, "Go Down Moses." The archangels circled several times and then dropped the hideously mangled bodies. We kept walking, and a while later Ellen and Nimdok fell in behind us. They were no worse for wear.

But now Ellen walked with a limp. AM had left her that.

It was a long trip to the ice caverns, to find the canned food. Ellen kept talking about Bing cherries and Hawaiian fruit cocktail. I tried not to think about it. The hunger was something that had come to life, even as AM had come to life. It was alive in my belly, even as we were in the belly of the Earth, and AM wanted the similarity known to us. So he heightened the hunger. There was no way to describe the pains that not having eaten for months brought us. And yet we were kept alive. Stomachs that were merely cauldrons of acid, bubbling, foaming, always shooting spears of sliver-thin pain into our chests. It was the pain of the terminal ulcer, terminal cancer, terminal paresis. It was unending pain . . .

And we passed through the cavern of rats.

And we passed through the path of boiling steam.

And we passed through the country of the blind.

And we passed through the slough of despond.

And we passed through the vale of tears.

And we came, finally, to the ice caverns. Horizonless thousands of miles in which the ice had formed in blue and silver flashes, where novas lived in the glass. The downdropping stalactites as thick and glorious as diamonds that had been made to run like jelly and then solidified in graceful eternities of smooth, sharp perfection.

We saw the stack of canned goods, and we tried to run to them. We fell in the snow, and we got up and went on, and Benny shoved us away and went at them, and pawed them and gummed them and gnawed at them and he could not open them. AM had not given us a tool to open the cans.

Benny grabbed a three quart can of guava shells, and began to batter it against the ice bank. The ice flew and shattered, but the can was merely dented while we heard the laughter of a fat lady, high overhead and echoing down and down and down the tundra. Benny went completely mad with rage. He began throwing cans, as we all scrabbled about in the snow and ice trying to find a way to end the helpless agony of frustration. There was no way.

Then Benny's mouth began to drool, and he flung himself on Gorrister . . .

In that instant, I felt terribly calm.

Surrounded by madness, surrounded by hunger, surrounded by everything but death, I knew death was our only way out. AM had kept us alive, but there was a way to defeat him. Not total defeat, but at least peace. I would settle for that.

I had to do it quickly.

Benny was eating Gorrister's face. Gorrister on his side, thrashing snow, Benny wrapped around him with powerful monkey legs crushing Gorrister's waist, his hands locked around Gorrister's head like a nutcracker, and his mouth ripping at the tender skin of Gorrister's cheek. Gorrister screamed with such jagged-edged violence that stalactites fell; they plunged down softly, erect in the receiving snowdrifts. Spears, hundreds of them, everywhere, protruding from the snow. Benny's head pulled back sharply, as something gave all at once, and a bleeding raw-white dripping of flesh hung from his teeth.

Ellen's face, black against the white snow, dominoes in chalk dust. Nimdok with no expression but eyes, all eyes. Gorrister half-conscious. Benny now an animal. I knew AM would let him play. Gorrister would not die, but Benny would fill his stomach. I turned half to my right and drew a huge ice-spear from the snow.

All in an instant:

I drove the great ice-point ahead of me like a battering ram, braced against my right thigh. It struck Benny on the right side, just under

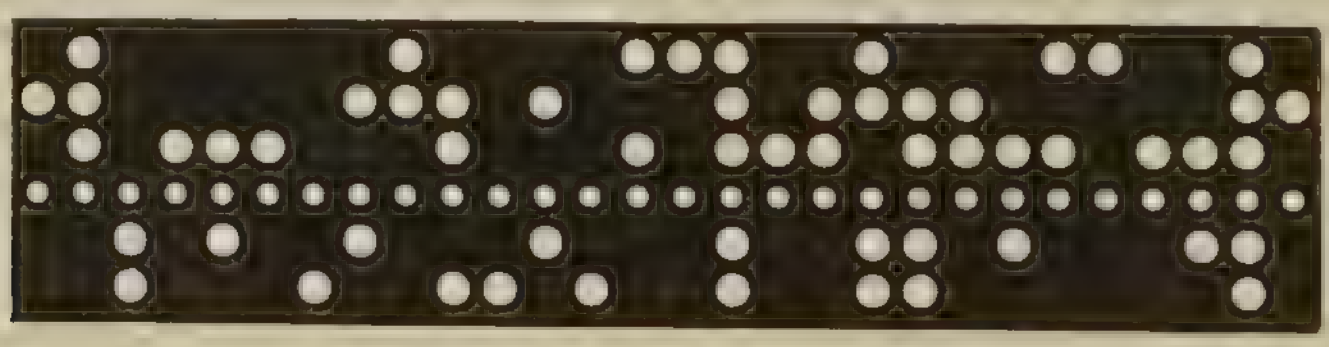
the rib cage, and drove upward through his stomach and broke inside him. He pitched forward and lay still. Gorrister lay on his back. I pulled another spear free and straddled him, still moving, driving the spear straight down through his throat. His eyes closed as the cold penetrated. Ellen must have realized what I had decided, even as fear gripped her. She ran at Nimdok with a short icicle, as he screamed, and into his mouth, and the force of her rush did the job. His head jerked sharply as if it had been nailed to the snow crust behind him.

All in an instant.

There was an eternity beat of soundless anticipation. I could hear AM draw in his breath. His toys had been taken from him. Three of them were dead, could not be revived. He could keep us alive, by his strength and talent, but he was *not* God. He could not bring them back.

Ellen looked at me, her ebony features stark against the snow that surrounded us. There was fear and pleading in her manner, the way she held herself ready. I knew we had only a heartbeat before AM would stop us.

It struck her and she folded toward me, bleeding from the mouth. I could not read meaning into her expression, the pain had been too great, had contorted her face; but it *might* have been thank you. It's possible. Please.



Some hundreds of years may have passed. I don't know. AM has been having fun for some time, accelerating and retarding my time sense. I will say the word now. Now. It took me ten months to say now. I don't know. I *think* it has been some hundreds of years.

He was furious. He wouldn't let me bury them. It didn't matter. There was no way to dig up the deckplates. He dried up the snow. He brought the night. He roared and sent locusts. It didn't do a thing; they stayed dead. I'd had him. He was furious. I had thought AM hated me before. I was wrong. It was not even a shadow of the hate he

now slavered from every printed circuit. He made certain I would suffer eternally and could not do myself in.

He left my mind intact. I can dream, I can wonder, I can lament. I remember all four of them. I wish—

Well, it doesn't make any sense. I know I saved them, I know I saved them from what has happened to me, but still, I cannot forget killing them. Ellen's face. It isn't easy. Sometimes I want to, it doesn't matter.

AM has altered me for his own peace of mind, I suppose. He doesn't want me to run at full speed into a computer bank and smash my skull. Or hold my breath till I faint. Or cut my throat on a rusted sheet of metal. There are reflective surfaces down here. I will describe myself as I see myself:

I am a great soft jelly thing. Smoothly rounded, with no mouth, with pulsing white holes filled by fog where my eyes used to be. Rubbery appendages that were once my arms; bulks rounding down into legless humps of soft slipper matter. I leave a moist trail when I move. Blotches of diseased, evil gray come and go on my surface, as though light is being beamed from within.

Outwardly: dumbly, I shamble about, a thing that could never have been known as human, a thing whose shape is so alien a travesty that humanity becomes more obscene for the vague resemblance.

Inwardly: alone. Here. Living under the land, under the sea, in the belly of AM, whom we created because our time was badly spent and we must have known unconsciously that he could do it better. At least the four of them are safe at last.

AM will be all the madder for that. It makes me a little happier. And yet . . . AM has won, simply . . . he has taken his revenge . . .

I have no mouth. And I must scream.

There is really not a great deal to be said about this story. It tells itself in straightaway terms, and makes its moral (I feel) somewhat heavily at the end. As I recall, I wrote it while I was in the US Army, stationed in Kentucky, and I'm not at all certain it was written for money. I think there was some of my horror at the "Southern intellect" hinted-at, in it. This may seem obscure, since this is a science fiction story about a circus and a group of telepaths, but for one who was, for many years, a Mickey Mouse parlor liberal, it was the first genuine stirrings of social conscience. We allow terrible things to happen, and turn our faces away in horror, but we never commit ourselves. Either we feel we are not in a position to do any good–ludicrous when examined closely—or we cop-out intellectually, rationalizing the nature of the crime, and the nature of the struggle in the deepest, most esoteric, and most cheaply hypocritical terms. There is a song the kids in SNCC sing. It goes, "Which side are you on?" and that, friends, is where it's at. You're either for, or against. The time for fence-sitting is long past. Excuse the militancy. All this is from the viscera, and has very little to do with

Big Sam Was My Friend

I GUESS WORKING FOR A TEEPER CIRCUS ain't the quietest work in the Galaxy, but what the dickens, it's more than just a buck, and you see a lot of the settled worlds, and there's always enough quailette around to keep a guy happy, so why should I kick. By that I mean, so what if they *did* lynch my friend Big Sam out on Giuliu II? So what, you can always find another friend someplace around. But every time I start thinking that way, I kick myself mentally and say Johnny Lee, you got to stop passing Sam off like that. He was a good friend. He was a sick man, and he couldn't help what he did, but that's no call to be passin' him off so quick.

Then I'd start to remember the first time I'd ever seen Big Sam. That was outside Shreveport. Not the *old* Shreveport, but the one on Burris, with the green-sand hills just beyond in the dusk. We were featuring Dolly Blaze that time. She was a second stage pyrotic with a cute little trick of setting herself on fire, and what with her figure what it was, well, it wasn't much of a trick—even for a drum-banger like me—to kick up some pretty hot publicity about the circus.

It was the second show, and we'd packed the tent full—which wasn't odd, because two hundred Burrites, each as big as an elephant (and looking a little bit like elephants with those hose proboscises), crammed our pneumotent till there was hardly room for the hawkers to mill through—when I spotted him. It wasn't so strange to spot a Homebody from Earth on a Ridge world, what with the way we Earthmen move around, but there was something odd about *this* Homebody. Aside from the fact that he was close to seven feet tall.

It wasn't long till I spotted him as a teeper of some sort. At first, I figured him for a clairvoyant, but I could tell from the way he watched the acrobats (they were a pair of Hungarian floaters called the Spindotties, and the only way they could have fallen was to lose their teep powers of anti-grav altogether), the way he tensed up when they were making a catch, that he couldn't read the future. Then I figured him for an empath, and that would have been useless for the circus; except in an administrative capacity of course. To tell us when one of the performers was sick, or unhappy, or a bad crowd, or like that. But right then credits were tight and we couldn't afford an empath, so I counted him off. But as I watched him sitting there in the stands, between two big-as-houses Burrites sucking up pink lemonade from squeeze-bulbs, I discounted the empath angle, too.

I didn't realize he was a teleport till Fritz Bravery came on with his animal pack.

In our circus, we clear both side rings for the central circle, when a specialty act goes on. Then the fluoro-bands are jockeyed into position over the center ring, and the mini-tapes set their reaction music for all-bands. That way we draw attention to the big act only.

Fritz Bravery was an old-timer. He had been a lion-tamer in a German circus back Home, before teeping was understood, and the various types outlined. That was when Fritz had found out the reason he was so good with animals was that he was what the French had

labeled *animaux-voyeur*. Which, in English, the way we accept it now, means he and the beasts think alike, and he suggests to them and like they just go through hoops if he thinks *jump through a hoop*.

But Fritz was also one of those harkeners after the old days. He thought show biz was dead, nothing but commercial and plebeian crap left. You know, one of those. And he had lost his wife Gert somewhere between Madison Square Plaza and Burris, and eventually the old joy juice had grabbed him.

That night old Fritz Bravery was juiced to the ears.

You could spot it the moment he got into the ring with the beasts. He was using three big Nubian lions and a puma and a dree and a slygor, those days. Plus one mean bitch of a black panther called Felice, the likes of which for downright cussedness I've never seen.

Old Fritz got with them, and he was shaky from the start. King Groth, who ran the show, looked at me, and I looked at him, and we both thought, *I hope to God Fritz can handle them tonight with his senses all fogged up like that.* But we didn't do anything, because Fritz always had his escape plate ready to lift him over their heads, if he got into trouble. And besides, it was *his* act, we had no right to cramp it before he'd shown his stuff.

But King murmured in my ear, "Better start looking around for a new cat man, Johnny. Fritz won't be good much longer." I nodded, and felt sort of sad, because Fritz was as good a cat man as we'd ever had with the circus.

The old man went around them, walking backward with his lektrowhip snapping and sparking sweetly, and for a while everything was fine. He even had the lions and the puma up in a tricky pyramid, with the black panther about to leap up the backs of the five lions, to take her place at the apex of the pyramid. He pulled off that number pretty well, though one of the lions stumbled as the pyramid was breaking up, and growled at him. We had grown to know the difference between a "show" growl—commanded mentally by Fritz—for fright effect in the act, and a real one. A real one free of Fritz's control. That was this last one. So we knew old Fritz was losing control.

We grew more alert as he herded the lions and the puma into the corner of the force-cage in which he performed his act. It was transparent around the four walls, but there nonetheless.

Then Fritz—ignoring Felice, who followed the other Earth-beasts—went to work on the dree. He got her to rotate on all sixteen, and hump, and then turn inside out, which is a pretty spectacular thing, considering a dree's technicolor innards. Then he got it to lift him on one appendage, and place him gently on another, all the way up the length of her body, from appendage to appendage.

Then he worked for a while with the slygor.

It was poisonous, so he donned gloves, and used the sonic-whistle on it alone. Since electricity did not affect it in any way. Even his work with the slygor was fair that night, and for a while we thought he would make it fine. I kept tossing this seven-foot Homebody in the stands a look from time to time, trying to decide what sort of a teep he was, but he was just watching the act, and smiling, and not doing a thing.

Then Fritz went to work on Felice.

She had been invershipped from Earth not more than three weeks before, and the trip through inverspace, coupled with her natural instinctive nastiness, and more than likely allied with some temperament quirk aggravated by the warping of the ship and its occupants through inverspace, had left her a jangle-nerved, heaped-up body of hate and fury. We had had several close calls with her nipping her feeder-robots, and I for one didn't like to see Old Fritz in there with her.

But he was determined to break her—showmanship and all that bushwah—so we let him go ahead. After all, he *did* have the escape plate there, which whisks him anti-gravitically over the heads of the animals, should there be trouble.

He picked up his lektrowhip, and moved in on Felice. She sat crouched back on her haunches, waiting him out. He stopped a foot from her, so close he could have stroked her sleek black fur. Then he did a double-movement crack-crack! with the lektrowhip, and caught her on the snout with a spark. Felice leaped.

At that precise instant, the most remarkable thing I've ever glommed in all my days as flack for a top, happened. I've never yet been able to figure it out—whether the beasts were actually in mental contact with one another, or it was just chance—but the puma got to its feet, and softly padded over to the escape plate . . . and sat down on it. The lions moved out, and positioned themselves around the

force cage. Fritz was hemmed in completely. Then Felice began stalking him.

It was the most fascinating and horrifying thing I've ever seen. To witness that big cat, playing footsie with old Fritz. The tamer tried to control her, but even from where we were in the stands, we could see the sweat on his face, and the dark lines in the completely white of his face. He was scared; he had lost control of them completely. He knew he was dead.

Felice's eyes were two barbs, ready to impale poor old Fritz, and we were so stunned, it all happened so quickly, we just sat there and so help me God we just *watched!*

I felt like a Roman in the arena.

Felice crouched again, and the muscles in her black shoulders hunched and bunched and tensed, and she sprang full on old Fritz.

He fell down, and her crushing weight landed atop him, and her jaws opened wide, with yellow fangs straining yowpingly for Fritz Bravery's neck. Her head came up, and back, and her throat was stretched tight so the pulse of a blood vein could be seen, and then the head came down like the blade of a guillotine.

But Fritz wasn't there.

He was sitting up in the stands with the seven-foot Homebody. That was when I knew. Hell, *anybody'd* be able to tell, by then. He was a teleport. The best kind—an outgoing teleport.

He had teeped Fritz out of the jaws of the black panther.

I looked at King Groth, who was looking from Felice to Fritz and back, not knowing I had already tagged the Homebody as a teeper, and there was amazement on his face.

"We got us a new star act, King," I said, slipping out of my seat. I cocked a thumb at Fritz, who was talking bewilderedly to the seven-foot Homebody. I started threading my way between the elephant-big Burrites, toward Fritz and his savior.

Behind me, I heard King Groth saying, "Go get 'im boy."

I got him.

Now I won't bother going into the year Big Sam spent with the circus. It was pretty routine. We covered the stardust route from Burris to Lyli A to Crown Colony to Peck's Orchard to MoultonX/11i11 (they have a treaty there with the natives, so long as they use

both Homebody and native name for the planet) to Ringaling and right along the Ridge to the new cluster worlds of Dawnsa, Jowlak, Min, Thornwire and Giuliu II. That was where we lost Big Sam.

There on Giulie II—where they lynched him.

But to understand what happened, *why* it happened, I'd better tell you about Big Sam. Not just that he was nearly seven feet tall, with a long, horsey face, and high cheekbones, and dark, sad blue eyes. But *about* him, what he was like.

And this is the best way to tell it:

Sam's act consisted of several parts. For instance, at the beginning, we turned off all the fluoro bands. Then three roustabots clanked out carrying this big pole in their metal arms. They would kick off the cover plate of the hole we had sunk in the floor of the arena or tent, and insert the pole in it, then clamp it so it was rigid.

Then one of the roustabots would switch on the torchfinger of his utility hand, and set fire to the pole. We had already doused it in oil, and the thing caught fire up its length, till there was a pillar of fire in the middle of the ring. It was a specially treated pole, and didn't really burn—though the fire on it was real enough—so we used the same pole over and over.

Then the ringmaster would swoop in on his plate, and his sonic voice would boom out at the audience, "Laydeez and Gentilmenn! I ddrawww your attenshuuun to the center rinnnng, where the Galaxy's most mystifying, most extraorrrrdinary artiste will perform for you. I am pppprowd to present: The Unbelievable Ugo!"

That was Sam.

Then the one spot would go on, like the eye of a god, and pick out Sam, striding across the plastidust (sawdust went out with the high cost of invershipping). He would be wearing skin-tight black clothing that accentuated his slim build, and high-topped black boots—very soft and with two inch soles to make him seem even taller. And a black cape with a crimson lining. Helluva look, lemme tell ya.

He would advance to the center of the ring, just beside the burning pole, and raise his arms. A girl wearing spangles and not much else (that was Beatrice, whom I had been dating, when she wasn't on her iron filing kick—but that's another story, fortunately) would run out and take his cape, and Ugo, that's Sam, would turn and look at the pole for a long minute.

Then he would take a running leap, hit the pole and start to shinny up. Everyone would shriek. He was being burned to death. Then he was gone.

And a second later, he was at the top of the pole, on the little platform above the flames. Everyone was astonished. For some reason, they never realized he was a teleport. I guess there aren't many teleports around, and most people don't see them as flagrantly displaying their talents as Big Sam did. It's a recessive trait.

For a moment he would poise himself there on toe-tip, as the audios scirled their danger music on all-bands, and then as the drums rolled, Sam would do a neat swan dive off the platform. The shrieking would get even bigger then.

He would turn a gainer, a flip, a half-gainer and then—just as it seemed he was about to smash full force into the ground—he disappeared and reappeared standing lightly on the balls of his feet, in the same position he had been when he started—his arms widespread over his head, an enigmatic grin splitting his craggy features.

That was the first part of his act. The applause was always deafening. (And we never had to modify it by taped responses, either, isn't that beyond belief?)

To see an almost certain horrible death—you know how crowds all sit on the edge of their seats, *praying* subconsciously for a spectacular accident—and then to be whisked away from it so suddenly—brought to the edge of tragedy, and then to have their better natures win out, showing them how much nicer they always *knew* they were—that was the supreme thrill.

But it was merely a beginning.

Then Ugo-Sam did juggling—magnificent high-flown juggling with hundreds of knives, and fireballs, and even thousand-pound weights—moving them all by teleportation. Then he wrestled with the bear, slipping out of the most fearsome grips, as easily as a greased fish. Then came the tennis match he played with himself. (He beat himself in straight sets.)

His act was sensational. For on many of the outer Ridge worlds, they had had little or no truck with teleports. By the Service system for teeps, each of the categories had to send representative members to the Ridge worlds to serve tours, to spread Homebody technology

and advantages around, but there were so few teleports, they had been rarely seen.

So Big Sam was a novelty. And as such, he dragged the credits for us. I played him big.

But there was more to Sam than just the tricks.

We used to sit alone at night under a saffron sky, or a mauve sky or an ebony sky, and talk. I liked talking to him, because he wasn't dumb, like most of the washed-up and used-up carny creeps we had with us. He had been an educated man, that was obvious, and there was a deep, infinite sadness about him that sometimes made me want to cry, just talking to him there.

I remember the night I found out how sick Big Sam really was. That was on Rorespokine I, a little plug of a world by all rights we should have avoided; but a combination of low money for paychecks, repair work for the ships, and general all-around lethargy, had set us down on that whistle stop for a three-week set.

Mostly, we just puttered around and killed time resting up till the big six month tour on Giuliu II.

That night, Big Sam and I lay back with our heads on grassy mounds, staring up at the night that was deep blue with the stars ticking away eternity over us. I looked over at the rough topography of his face, and asked him, "Sam, what the hell is a guy like you doing out on the fly like this?"

His face tightened all over. It was so odd, the way he looked. So tight, like my question had sucked all the life from him.

"I'm looking for a dead girl, JohnnyLee." He always pronounced my name as though it were one word only. His answer didn't sink in for a second.

I didn't want to push, but I felt somehow this was the first opening-up he had ever given me.

"Oh? How'd that happen?"

"She died a long timg ago, Johnny. A long time ago."

His eyes closed. He no longer saw the stars.

"She was just a girl, Johnny. Just another girl, and I guess I was more in love with the idea of love, than with her."

I didn't say a word. For a long time, neither did he. Then, when I was starting to fall asleep, and thought he already had, he went on: "Her name was Claire. Nothing very pretentious about her, so simple

and clean. I wanted very much to marry her, I don't know why, we were nothing alike. Then one day we were walking, and I don't know what it was—just something, you know—and teleported away from her. Half a block away. I didn't know then, quite, what I could do. I had never teleported in front of Claire. I suppose it was a shock to her. She was a No-Talent, and it must have shocked her. I could see she was repulsed by the idea of it."

"I'd, I'd been . . . sleeping with her, Johnny, and I guess it was pretty foreign. Like finding out the guy you'd been making love to was an android or some-such. She ran away. I was so shocked at her attitude, I just didn't follow her.

"Then I head a screech and she screamed, and I teleported to the source of the scream, and she'd been hit by a truck, trying to cross the street. Oh, it wasn't my fault, nothing like that, and no guilt complex or anything, but—well, you know, I had to get away from things. So I took to the fly. Just like that."

He was finished. I said, "Just like that. You ever goin' back, Sam?"

He shook his head. "I don't suppose so. I'll find her someday."

I said, "Huh?"

He glanced over, and there was a hurt in his eyes. "Yeah, I suppose I never told you this, probably think it's a crazy idea; everyone else does. She's in Heaven."

"Nothing crazy about that, Sam," I said, big magnanimous that I was.

"Heaven is out here somewhere."

That stopped it. I was back to, "Huh?"

He nodded again. "Out here, on one of these, is Heaven. That's where she is. I'll find her." He waved at the stars overhead. I followed his arm. Up here? Heaven? On an alien world? I didn't say anything.

"Crazy?"

"No, I don't suppose it's any crazier than any other idea of Heaven or Hell," I replied soberly. It gave me the creeps, frankly.

"I'll find her."

"I sure hope so, Sam. I sure hope so."

He fell asleep before *I* did. Who could sleep with something like that to scare the crap out of you?

We hit Giuliu II on a Thursday, and by the following Friday a week,

we had a command performance scheduled for the Giuliun royalty. It was a wonderful deal; once we had performed and pleased the court, our success on Giuliu II was assured. Because they had a real Monarchy Plus set up on that world. And if the court liked us, the high glub-glub or whatever the hell they called the king, would send out a proclamation ordering *all* his subjects to attend or suffer some penalty. So we'd be all set.

We ran through the acts, in the palace, which was a great mansion, twice as big as our pneumotent, and I've got to admit, even washed-out Dolly Blaze and Fritz Bravery and the rest were magnificent. But, of course, Sam stole the show. They had never seen a teleport on Giuliu II, and Sam was at his sparklingest best. He was more daring and unusual than ever. There was even a trick with Felice that had everyone gasping and finally chuckling.

When it was over, the king and his court invited us to a huge banquet, and ceremonial party. It was the greatest. They had huge platters of fried and braised meats, bowls of planetary fruits, tankards of ales and liqueurs that were direct lineal descendants of ambrosia. It was the greatest.

Then they brought on the dancing girls, and they were even better. I spotted one smooth-limbed little number I decided to approach with dalliance in mind, after everyone had settled down a little. The Giuliuns were Homebody type right down to their navels, and I wasn't worried about picking up any alien equivalents of VD. Besides, she had the cutest little po-po I'd seen in months. Beatrice, the girl who assisted Sam, and who I had been shacking with, was eyeing me, and eyeing a handsome brute, all tanned and wearing bronze armor, who was guarding one of the big doors. I decided to let her cheat on me, thus leaving the road clear for the little dancer.

The party was well under way, when the king stood up and made some big deal announcement about us being just in time to see the Sacred Virgin Ceremony of Giuliu II, which occurred but once every twenty-five years. He even hinted it had been moved up a few weeks to accommodate us in this hour of circus triumph. We all applauded, and watched as they set up a high platform made of ever-smaller gold risers. It was quite a thrill.

We were all gathered around at the one end of the ceremonial hall, with the pyramid of risers at the other. We weren't interested in the

least about this ceremony, but to be polite, we watched as they set up some sort of chopping block affair, and put two burning braziers beside the block.

It was getting more interesting by the moment. While most of the circus folk were still gorging themselves on the foods and fruits overflowing the table, Sam and I turned full around to watch this. I heard him mumble something about picturesque native ceremonies, and nodded my head.

The king signaled to one of his bully-boys, and the bully-boy swung a long-handled clapper at a tapestry hanging from floor to ceiling beside him. They must have had a gong concealed behind it, because the sound almost deafened me.

Then the king—of his title I'm not sure, but his rank was obvious—spoke for a few minutes on the history and traditions of the Sacred Virgin Ceremony. We didn't really listen too closely, mainly because he was speaking in similes and the noise from the crowd around us drowned him half out.

But in a little while we got the impression this was very important stuff to the Giuliuns, and when the king clapped his hands, we turned to the gang, and tried to get them to shut up. Those slobs would rather eat than think.

They didn't shut up till the gong sounded again, but when the gray-hooded man with the gigantic meat cleaver brought the pretty blonde girl out onto the platform, they all signed off like we'd cut their vocal cords.

She was a magnificently beautiful creature. Her hair was long and blonde, and her body was full and straight. Her eyes the deepest and most lustrous brown I've ever seen.

The executioner—hell yes! that's what he was—helped her over to the block, and her face was very calm. Calm, it seemed, the way someone's face would be if they were dying of cancer, and knew they could do nothing about it. But this young girl wasn't dying of cancer; she was about to have that gray-hooded man chop off her head.

It was apparent, that was what was about to happen.

A sacrificial ceremony.

The hooded man helped her to kneel before the block, and she lay her head in the notch. The executioner pulled her hair away from her

neck, gently, and laid it over her left shoulder in a long blonde streamer.

Then he tested his hatchet's edge, and stepped back. He planted his feet wide apart, and swung the axe up. Everyone screamed, and it sounded like a million buzzsaws. Before anyone could do anything, the executioner brought the axe down almost touching her neck, to get the proper placement for the real swing.

That was when I heard Sam's muted gurgle. He had been mumbling, there beside me, for over a minute, and I hadn't realized it, I was so engrossed in watching the tableau on the chopping block. Then I heard him mutter, "Claire!"

And I knew there was going to be trouble.

I saw him stand up, out of the corner of my eye, and as the executioner swung the axe up in a two-handed whirl, Sam disappeared from beside me, and the next instant, before the blade had a chance to fall on that lovely neck, he was there. His arm snaked around the gray-hooded man's neck, and his hand shot out to catch the descending handle of the axe.

He wrenched the death tool from the man's hand, and threw it with a spinning clatter to the floor of the chamber far below the pyramid. Then his fist came back and caught the hatchetman across his hidden face. The executioner stumbled, and Sam doubled him over with a belly-blow that made the face behind the gray hood scream. Sam straightened him with a right to the tip of the jaw, and the hatchetman went caroming off the pyramid. He landed with a sick thump.

The king was on his feet, livid with rage, and the court was screaming, "Profanity! Outrage! Transgression!" The king clapped his hands, and a dozen of the tanned bully-boys (one of whom was the hawg Beatrice had been ogling) raced onto the pyramid and grabbed Sam around the waist, the neck, the legs and of course he teleported out of their grip. He was back beside me. The king was leaping up and down, screeching at the top of his lungs, to *get* that man. Sam stood impassively, waiting. Then King Groth walked over, and said, "Stand still, Sam. Let's find out how much damage you've done."

He went to talk to the other king. Groth was a sharp operator, and if anyone could pour oil on the waters, it was him. We watched as he talked to the king, who was getting more furious and apoplectic by the moment.

"Sam, Sam," I said quietly, "why did you do it? For Christ's sake, *why?*"

He looked at me, and said, "This isn't much like Heaven, is it." Then I knew he had found Claire.

The blonde girl still kneeled beside the chopping block. She had not moved, except to raise her head from the notch.

King Groth came back, and his face was gray.

"Sam, they say you have to die."

Big Sam looked at him, and didn't say a word. I don't think he cared, really.

"Look, Sam, we're going to fight this. They can't do it to a Homebody. We can fight it, don't worry."

The king rushed over, and started to screech something. "Listen," I piped in, just to stop him, "he is a sick man, he didn't know what he was doing. You have to remember he knows nothing of your local customs."

It didn't make a bit of difference. "He must die. That is the reward for interrupting the Sacred Virgin Ceremony."

We argued and hassled and made a big stink out of it, and I think the only reason we all didn't gallop out of there and pull up stakes was that we were afraid we'd *all* be held and executed. And Big Sam was the only teleport in the crowd. And there was something else; something I'm afraid and ashamed, even today, to say.

I think we were all afraid of losing the business.

That's right. Pretty disgusting, ain't it? We could have set Dolly Blaze to burning the joint, and we could have escaped. We could have done at least a hundred things to distract the Giuliuns. But we were afraid we'd lose the business, and we were almost willing to let the man die for that.

Finally, though, the king said: "We must leave it to the Sacred Virgin, then. Let her decision be the one."

That sat okay with us—we wanted a way out so bad then it didn't matter—and we all looked at Sam. Softly, the hurt came back into his eyes, and a softness surrounded his mouth, and he nodded. "That's fine," he said simply.

We all walked up to the pyramid, and looked at her. She was very clean and simple looking. Just the way I'd imagine Sam's Claire might

have looked. We all stared at her, and with a sneer, she snarled, "Let him die!"

And that was that.

They took him up to the block, and they removed her, and they shoved Sam's head into the notch. Then someone made the motion that he be hung, because the block was reserved for the Sacred Virgin. So they strung up a fiber rope—right there in that beautiful hall—and they put it around Sam's neck, and ten men got on the other end of the rope that hung over a beam from above.

And we just watched. Can you understand that? We just stood there and watched as Sam was prepared for hanging. I tried to stop them, finally. I suppose I came out of my trance. "Wait, you can't do this!" But King Groth and two of the performers grabbed me by the arms, and held me.

"This is their world, Johnny, let them do what they have to do."

And Sam looked at me, and I could see in his eyes that it didn't matter to him. It was the same hurt, all over again. He had been wrong; he *did* have a hag riding him about Claire's death. This was one way to clear it off.

They yanked on the rope, and Sam went up.

He hardly twisted or kicked or twitched.

I couldn't watch.

Because there were a couple of things that made me ill way deep inside. The first was knowing King Groth and the circus and even myself, had sacrificed this nice, quiet guy with a problem, for the sake of a credit. And the other thing, the thing that really stopped us from trying to help him, I think, was that Sam wanted to die. He could have teeped out of that noose at any moment, but he didn't. He let them lynch him. He had squared away with Claire.

We finished our tour on Giuliu II. Sam had been right: it wasn't much like Heaven.

I used to think I was ugly. Well, it wasn't exactly a vagrant whim on my part; I really was awfully miserable-looking. Short, pale, scrawny, braces, glasses, I sucked my thumb, I had pimples. Yechhh. With the exception of Helen Ralph and Jean Bittner in Painesville, when we were all too young to know what "infant sexuality" was all about, I never even kissed a girl till I was nineteen. I have tried to make up for it since then. Now, today, I am able to get across a mystic impression that I am a handsome devil. It is, of course, an illusion. For those of you out there in paperbackland who also feel grotty, I will pass along my secret. The emmis, *the truth, pay attention. Think pretty. Now if you'd rather have some charlatan fleece you of a couple of grand with beauty treatments or plastic surgery or social dancing or how to speak grammatical Urdu, then go ahead, get took. But if you want the easiest way to do it, just heed those two words. Think pretty. Conceive of yourself as dashing, debonair, cool filled with* panache *and aplomb. And soon the aura spreads out from inside you, and all them tender juicy items are pausing to reconsider you. Because, friends and neighbors, we live in a Time of Beautiful People. Gorgeous is revered. We can't stand anything even remotely ordinary; it has to be young and lovely. So you are not where it's at, if you aren't pretty. The trend is up, and it's getting worse. We spend billions more on cosmetics each year than education, and if it continues to spiral, soon enough we will come to a time when we may contemplate*

Eyes of Dust

"In the kingdom of the blind, a one-eyed man is God." Contrariwise, in a world of absolute beauty, who labels ugliness?

IT WAS INEVITABLE THEY SHOULD MARRY. She with the mole on her right cheek, he blind in the presence of light. There should have been

no reason for tolerating them on Topaz; on a world dedicated to beauty, imperfection could not be endured. Yet, they lived, and were avoided, and mated. As it should have been. Beauty seeks its level, as does ugliness. As do pariahs.

So they were married, and they managed to live, and soon, she was with child.

The terrible thing began.

The city of Light on the planet Topaz rose five hundred feet into the pearl sky. Its towers glowed with an aura imprisoned in the matter itself. All pastels: all blues and pinks and soft greens, that blended into one blinding impression of flow and swirl. The towers were of three heights. Sweeping giants that rose five hundred feet to the fraction of an inch; medium-sized towers that were mere pauses at three hundred feet, before the giants hurled past them; and midget towers, delicate and impertinent in their hundred-foot rise.

Glistening, diving, then arching in to a hold at another tower, the flying bridges and roadways were marvels of construction. At the various levels, clear layers of substance provided risers and dividers, giving the city the look of a fairy empire, set away from an ugly world, swathed in its own beauty.

And the people.

Each man, woman, child was a note in a great symphony of perfection. Both simplicity and flamboyance were there, but so intermingled and integrated that nowhere could coarseness be discerned. Their faces were neither blank nor vapid. They held beauty in their eyes, and in the clearness of their complexions, and the rhythm of their stride.

There was nothing but beauty on Topaz. In the city of Light there was nothing but the glorious presentation of perfection and elegance. It was a vital culture, rich in thought, complex in design, but dedicated to the beauty of life, and the reflection of that beauty in all things material.

The blind man and his wife, the moley woman, lived in the small units outside the city, where the farmers tilled their symmetrical fields with equipment that was handsome in its construction, efficient in its operation.

They lived in a split-level home that boasted all modern robotic

conveniences. The lights dimmed or shone according to palmed instructions; heat radiated from those walls at the touch of a stud; food was prepared by fail-safe robochefs; snits hummed from wall-cubbies to clean up instantly.

In the machine cellar, where the servomechanisms were housed, where the nerve center of the house was located, the blind man and the moley women had constructed an extra room, set off from the light, for a special purpose. In the room, soft walls shrouded sound, protected the inhabitant from outside distractions. In the room, no light penetrated, and the bed was a pallet of downiness.

The inhabitant was Person.

Person, for no other name had ever been given him. Not like the blind man, who was Broomall, or the moley woman, who was Ordak. They had names, for they went abroad onto Topaz occasionally, and had to deal with others. But no such intercourse was practiced by Person. He never saw the light, and he never strolled, for the room was his home, and his parents had insured he would never venture from it.

In the machine cellar of the split-level out beyond the city of Light, Person sat is stolid silence, hands folded delicately in his lap, feet turned inward and at rest.

Eyes of dust filled with—not quite?—colors that moved.

Person could not have been endured on Topaz. On a world of beauty, all beauty, ugliness was a known and despised factor. Broomall and Ordak were malformed . . . a mole and blindness . . . but they had been in the community long, and they were intelligent enough to keep to themselves. But their offspring was another matter.

With eyes of dust, who could tolerate such a thing?

Broomall unpalmed the door, and entered.

"Father . . ." Person murmured in a tongue as sweet as brook water, tones like butterflies' wings.

"Yes. How are you today? Have you had another vision?"

Person nodded, his gray sockets turning toward the blind man. "It came earlier, Father. Deepest black, with bright shoots of red thrusting up. It reminded me of the mouth of a volcano, Father."

The blind man felt his way to the pallet, lowered his body, and shook his head slowly. "But you have never seen a volcano, my son."

Person took a step away from the wall, and his great hands hung loosely below his knees. "I know."

"Then, how—"

"The way I saw the gulls dipping over the green spit of land. The way I saw the deep river of orange mud that bubbled its way to the swamp. It is all one, Father. I see."

The blind man shook his head in bewilderment. There were answers here; to questions he had never asked.

"Where is Mother? She has not been to see me in several times."

The blind man sighed. "She must work, Son, if we wish to fill up our food bins. She has taken labor in the wafting center."

"Ah." Person conjured up a vision of the sense centers, where smells and sounds and feelings of beauty were poured out on the air of Topaz, for the inhabitants to enjoy. "She must like it there. So near to the scent of gardenias."

"She says it's a job."

Person nodded. His great head bowed slightly, and pits of shadow marked his eyes of grayness.

"Is there anything you want?"

Person slid down the wall, into the cool darkness, and answered softly, for he knew his father was without sight, even without the sight *he* possessed. "No, Father. I lack for nothing. I have my meal cakes and my ale. I have my shadows and my colors. And there is the smell of time passing. I need nothing more."

"How strange you are, my son," the blind man said. Person gave a soft musky chuckle of amusement.

"How strange I am indeed, Father."

The blind man got slowly to his feet, the bones of his legs cracking barely. "Soon, my son," he said finally.

"Go sweetly, my father," Person said, using the words of the people of Topaz.

"Stay softly," replied his father, traditionally.

Then he went out, carefully palm-locking the door and setting it to a fresh combination. Caution could not be too deep in this matter. Twenty years had shown that. Twenty years, during which time their son had remained alive, to roam at will in his world of strange blind-sight.

The blind man climbed the ramp to the living floor, and sat

cross-legged on his low platform, sending soft pipings flickering from a helix-shaped flute.

He played without break for some time, until the porter glowed pink and Ordak took form in the bowl.

"Wheeew!" She stepped out of the bowl and sank onto a nest of foamettes. "What a day. If I never smell another gardenia, it'll be too soon. Good evening, dear. How was he today?"

The blind man laid aside his flute, and extended his arms to the woman. He took her into their enfolding circle and held her dark hair against his neck. His answer was a grunt. She understood.

"How will it be, Broomall? Tell me."

He put her from him gently, and sighed. "Ordak, how can I say it'll be good, when it gets worse each day? You know he can't go out, and you know we must live here . . . they would never tolerate him outside, even to the spaceport and off. We're trapped here, my darling."

She stood up and smoothed down the front of her sweepspun tunic and skirt. Her hair was coiffed in such a way that the mole on her right cheek was covered. They knew of her deformity, of course, but not seeing it made it easier for them.

She was standing there, wondering what would come from the future, her blind husband at her feet, when the future dropped from the sky.

As she stood there, silent, and wondering, the force-bead drive of a cross-continent copter ruptured and the ponderous vehicle plunged down from its cruising level at twenty-five hundred feet. It fell two hundred yards from the split-level, demolishing the aboveground sections of the home without warning. Only the machine cellar was saved by a fluke of impact; saved for the searchmecks and analyzers that came later, to estimate the damage, and to extricate those left alive.

Aboveground, no one was left alive. The last two known imperfects on Topaz had gone to a companionable rest; where beauty and ugliness had no meaning.

But belowground . . .

The terrible thing began in earnest. What had lain in wait for twenty years, now snarled, leaped, and threw itself at the throat of beauty on Topaz.

They found him meditating.

They came down through the rubble with forcepak beams that melted the twisted metal and fused plastic into solid, attractive walls of pastel, between which they picked their delicate way. When they came to the secret room—whose door was not in the least pleasing to the eye—they stopped, perplexed, and considered what to do.

There were three of them, handsome men in the extreme. One was blond, with wide-set blue eyes and the air of an executive. He carried himself within his gold and copper-thread tunic with the calm assurance of a man who knows he is competent and handsome. In the extreme. The second was only a few inches shorter than the first man's six feet, and his dark, tightly-curled head of hair swooped delicately down across a sculpted white forehead. He gave an immediate impression of Adonis-like proportions.

The third man was the classic Greek ideal of virility and competence. His deep-set gray eyes snapped back and forth with authority and compassion. His walk was the walk of the legionnaire, his speech the measured cadence of the wise man. He would never go bald, his smile would never fade.

"I've never seen anything like this, before," said the curly-haired analyzer, whose name was Roul.

"This isn't standard in machine cellars, is it?" asked the leader, whose name was Prathe.

The third man, Hold, shook his head. "No, and I must admit it's an unpleasant arrangement. Unsprayed. Crude." He gave a soft shudder.

"Well, let's open it," suggested Prathe, hefting his forcepak.

The other two did not answer, and that was a perfect sign of agreement, so he applied the beam. A wide arc of fruit-green streamed out and washed the door. In a few seconds it had fused along the sides, and run together in excellent symmetry. They stared through into the thrusting darkness.

They found him meditating.

When first the light filtered through from behind them, they could not discern that it was human. It was a gray heap hulked close to the angle of floor and wall, its great head hung down, and hands turned into the lap.

Then, as the particulars became clear, each man in turn drew a

shocked breath. Pathe was first into the room, and his voice was an *almost*-unpleasant mixture of wonder and revulsion.

Roul followed, and as the form of Person grew specific, he uttered a round, pear-shaped, then suddenly, shattered cry of terror. "How vile!" And his face was unhandsome. In the extreme.

Hold shone his light down into the corner, and away as quickly. In its wild travels, the beam covered the room completely: pallet, bare walls, small dish with gruel still in it, mat on the floor. Then back to Person again, but this time, the pool of brilliance was directed at the floor and the edge of the Person's buttocks, so the full light did not fall on that face—Oh that face!

The great head with its high unkempt crown of nearly white hair . . . spread out and in two huge tufts at either temple. The heavy-jowled face, with the mouth that was a wicked, slanting slash through the pale white flesh. The ears that hugged close and round to the head.

Then the eyes . . .

The eyes of dust . . .

Two deep-nested pockets, where gray swirled. The gray of decaying bodies. The gray of storm clouds. The gray of feelings most unhappy, and of death. The eyes that seemed to see so deeply, yet could see nothing. Ugly eyes.

They raised their forcepaks, and Person stirred.

First there was light, and then there was no-light. First there was heat, and then there was no-heat. And—

First there was love, and then there was no-love. But in its place did not come the absence of love, the emptiness that the going of light and heat had left. Another moved in to take its place.

In its place came hate.

Much later, when the suns had set, and the moons had come up to mourn balefully in silence over the world of beauty, Topaz, others came. They found the three bodies, so ugly in death, so unhandsome in crushed and battered death.

Then they took him. They took him out, saying, "All this, all this." And there was such revulsion and such cursing and hatred for him. He was anathema. Pariah! He was ugliness amidst beauty.

"What will we do with him? How can we kill him?"

Then one came forward. A poet whose meters were correct, whose images were gorgeous. He was slim and well-mannered and it fell to him to envision the right way of it. To create beauty from ugliness, good from evil.

So they erected a straight silver pillar, and it rose shining and true toward the four moons, and they tied him to it, and set the faggots about. Then they lit him and watched him burn.

But Person had eyes of dust, and the eyes of dust saw what could not be seen, and the soul within was the sweet soul of the visionary.

He had the audacity to weep and cry as he burned, wailing, "Do not kill me! There is so much for me to see, so much I do not know!" He sobbed for the knowledge and visions he would never glimpse.

And it was good. The fire was beauty. (If only he had been wise enough not to scream!)

When the ashes settled, they were melted, and there was a perfect pool of lustreless silver where the pillar and Person had been.

It was beauty, as all was beauty.

And there were none who would dispute it: everything was beauty on Topaz now, they said. Beauty and peace.

But the night sky rang with the stifled and fading shrieks that would never entirely pass. And as the clouds passed before two of the moons, looking so much like the eyes of dust, it was clear that Topaz had cursed itself with ugliness.

The pastel towers were hideousness imprisoned in crystal, the now clumsily arching bridges were offensive to the sight, and even the very air, the very sweet and moist air, had turned foul and rancid.

To anyone who was weak and would admit it, it was obvious: eyes of dust could never be closed.

Any number of followers of my work have asked me with creased brows, why I chose to have so many of my stories during the past three years appear in a "girlie" magazine called Knight. *They feel, bless 'em, that anything I write should be first exposed in, maybe the* Saturday Review *or* Harper's *or* Evergreen Review. *Well, by way of answering them, consider:* Knight *does not edit my stories but prints them untouched as I submit them; they get Leo and Diane Dillon (my friends and the cover artists of the original edition of this volume) to do the illustrations; then pay me much less than many other markets, but very much a top dollar as far as their own rates are concerned; they let me experiment. Also consider, the previously-noted magazines seldom use science fiction, and when they do, it is of a certain stripe. It has been my contention for several years, that science fiction and the mainstream are no longer distinctly separate branches of the literary swim. Science fiction has been integrated in many ways—some valid and worthwhile, some hideously corrupted and sterile. But the melding of the two forms seems to me of prime importance for the continued virility and growth of both. Vonnegut has showed us the way. And Anthony Burgess. And John Hersey in* The Child Buyer; *and* Only Lovers Left Alive, *flawed as it was; and Bernard Wolfe in* Limbo; *and there are others. One such minor attempt to meet this challenge, as I was allowed to face it in the pages of* Knight, *is the character study called*

World of the Myth

DRAGON'S BREATH! Fire split up the night sky; and out of the darkness silence a screaming erupted across the blue-black heavens. From the center of the fire-lick a speck of silver and gray careered across the horizon, finally losing its sidewise drive, and began to fall. A stone in the sky.

Sliding down the backdrop of the billion stars, the speck hurtled toward the dark world below, spewing fire and flowers of black smoke, oily smoke, from its drive tubes. It dropped as though discarded by some God from His sky.

It fell in swooping arcs, insanely, swinging back and forth across the silent night as though whoever piloted it was frantically trying to keep its leading saucer-edge up.

It came down in one last swooping glide and roared over the edge of jungle that stretched nearly to the golden sea. The ship came down in the dunes, plowing a long, canary-colored furrow in the sand, and split like a ripe pod. A flare of red spat up from the ruptured tubes in one last gasp of power, but no explosion followed it.

There was the tiny sound of metal popping, crackling, cooling. Then silence as the ship lay where it had crashed, crumpled into a weird shape, one fin thrown up like a dislocated arm; it lay spent and useless, sent to the ground.

The sea rolled up; the dunes hummed emptily, softly; the jungle screamed; but nothing came near the ship to disturb its slovenly grave.

Sunlight shafted through a great rent in the hull, sending a swath of gold across Cornfeld's forehead and eyes. He lay unmoving for a time, then as the heat reached him, he stirred in his sleep-after-unconsciousness and threw an arm across his eyes. For a while longer he lay that way, till the heat grew oppressive; then he stirred. And began to move.

He made his way across the rubble of the plot-cabin and without thought to Iris Crosse or even Rennert, he stopped, on hands and knees, head hanging down, and drew great deep breaths. Thoughts began to patter along the track of his mind . . . alive . . . the crash . . . he was alive . . . that was important . . . the other two were in here . . . perhaps alive, perhaps not . . . but *he* was alive . . .

Consciousness came back fully now, and he stood up with unsteadiness. He pulled his ripped shirt loose from his jump-slacks and unsealed the front. He tossed the rag from him, and filled his lungs with air. Thank God. Alive!

He took three steps, trying to walk, staggered forward, and fell heavily on his side.

He lay that way for a few minutes, then stumbled to his feet.

He found Iris Crosse in her cabin, pinned beneath a wall cabinet that had broken free. Both her legs were crushed, but she was alive; she didn't seem to be bleeding internally. He managed to pull her out, and he carried her so light in his arms, back down the crazily-tilted corridor, to the rip in the ship's skin.

He laid her down gently on the soft yellow sand, in the deepest part of the shadow of the fin. The he looked down at her. Her face, even in unconsciousness, held the same willful power that had helped wreck the ship. If she had not had the fight with Rennert and used her boot on him, he would not have fallen against the console and dumped the pile rods, causing the explosion.

It had been merely chance that they had fallen to this planet. Had the accident occurred further out, they would have gone off into the deeps, forever—or until the tubes had split the ship with their fury. Had they been closer, he would not have been able to plow in with a dead console.

A faint stirring in the golden sand drew his attention across the dunes, almost to the edge of the lush jungle. Only heat-dancers. He turned away.

She was looking at him. There was glaze over her dark, piercing eyes, but she was looking at him. He saw her mouth work, and it looked so odd, for her lipstick had smeared across her mouth, onto one cheek. Her tongue came out and touched her lips, and then—in a chain reaction that began with the eyes widening—her face masked over with an expression of pain and torture. "No! W-Wayne . . . don't . . . stop, Wayne! I, no, stop . . . *you*!" And she fainted again.

Cornfeld sat down heavily in the sand, and his hands went to his long brown hair absently. He knew what fear had possessed her, and again he heard the sounds and saw the sights of the night Wayne Rennert had raped the woman.

Five months out in a Surveyship was a long time, but there had been no call for it, no need for it, no explanation. Rennert was a peculiar person; amoral more than immoral.

He dragged his thoughts away from the act as it had happened, and tried to slip himself into a scheme of reality for the situation at hand.

They were down on an alien planet, without any help, and with

Rennert dead . . . he stopped . . . dead? *Was* Rennert dead? He had not, for an instant, considered it any other way. Cornfeld's mouth went very dry; he realized he had *wanted* Rennert to be dead. But was he? Was it the situation he desired: alone on a desert island with Iris, without the deep, collie-brown eyes and wavy hair of Rennert always about? Was that what he had wanted . . . and was that the way it had turned out?

He got to his feet, feeling the sun beat down across his shoulders as he rose out of the tail fin's shadowy cool. Once more he crawled into the ship, and tacked along its battered insides, searching for the body.

There was no one in Rennert's stateroom. There was no one in the galley, and no one anywhere else in the plot room or the corridors.

He looked up at the downladder. It had been torn in half like a streamer of confetti, halfway down from its ceiling egress. In flight, the ladder lay on the floor, and the crew stepped over it when going from the lower half of the ship to the upper. Planetside, it ran up and down through the vessel, and with it broken off, gaining access to the other half of the saucer-shaped vessel was a difficult task.

He crawled back out through the rent in the hull, and did a careful tour of the ship. The saucer had plowed in snout first, leading edge first. The tail was in the air. The ship looked like a discus, imbedded in sand. In effect, it was. But whatever the comparisons, the lower half of the ship was in the air, and the upper section was thrust deep into the planet's soil.

Cornfeld went back inside. Rennert—if he was alive—was still up there in the sky-aimed half, and did he want to go get him? Did he want to find out if the man was alive, or did he want to balm his guilt with the thought Rennert had perished in the crash?

But what if he had been in the stores room, or the collar between sections? Lying there, needing help?

No! The answer came so distinctly, he was amazed to find himself stacking fallen lockers and equipment, in an effort to reach the snapped-off ladder. If he hated Rennert, why was he doing this? *Let him lie there!* He piled the debris higher.

From somewhere above came the sound of metal straining, rasping along metal. And bits of wall-surfacing material fell from the opening

above. He paused in his efforts, his face suddenly still, and looked up. The sound did not come again. Was it the ship settling? Or something else?

After a moment, he dragged a console attachment to the tower of rubble, and heaved it up with difficulty, feeling every bruised bone in his chest and back. He supported himself on a dangling strut, hanging like a silver snake from the ceiling, and climbed to the summit of the heap. Once there, he was a foot beneath the ladder's break-off, even with arms stretched high and tight.

He was sure he could not negotiate a descent and reclimb without knocking down the pile.

He bent his knees, and tested the pile. It shuddered beneath him, but held. He tensed, bent at the knees again, and holding his breath, he leaped!

His fingertips touched the ragged edges of the ladder, and then slipped. The world dropped away. Kicking the pile of rubble into all corners of the plot room, he crashed to the deck. He lay there, silently, feeling the pain throb in his head and spine, and the voice that came down from above was mocking:

"Glad I don't have to depend on *you*, Corny."

The voice did not register. The voice was something he had managed to forget in the space of a few hours. But the word did it. That word Rennert had often used; knowing in its use he was hurting Cornfeld.

The astrogator looked up, the pains still flashing brightly behind his eyes, and saw the face, framed in the opening at the top of the downladder. Rennert was alive. Cornfeld gasped, his back hurt unmercifully.

"Just lie still, I'll be down in a second," Rennert grinned that wide, white infectious grin of superiority. He disappeared.

An instant later a pair of heavily-muscled legs in jump-shorts—bloody jump-shorts—appeared in the opening, and the magno-sole sneakers gripped at the top rungs of the downladder.

He descended quickly, to the end of the whole sections, and then dropped athletically, grasping at the last moment for the bottom rung. He hung suspended there, swaying slightly, then dropped the rest of the way to the deck, agilely avoiding Cornfeld and the bits of

rubble beneath him. He landed with knees bent, and came erect with a leopard-like smoothness.

Rennert stood there and chuckled softly. "Honest to God! I mean, honest to *God*, Corny!" as though he were the father of a mischievous boy. He bent to help Cornfeld to his feet.

Cornfeld felt a staggering loathing come over him. "Let me alone," he snapped out, ending the phrase with a raw gasp as his back throbbed painfully.

Rennert shrugged and backed away.

Cornfeld tried to get up. His back flamed incredibly, but he was sure he had broken nothing. As he struggled to rise, Rennert went about the plot room methodically, till he found what he was seeking, a deck of scratchbutts, in a still-closed drawer.

He drew one out with two fingers and scratched it alight on the magno-sole of his sneaker.

As he lifted his foot for the motion, Cornfeld saw the nasty gash that had been ripped in the man's left thigh. The blood was still pulsing warmly down Rennert's leg.

Rennert took a deep drag on the butt and offered it to Cornfeld. "Smoke?"

Cornfeld shook his head no, got one arm under himself, and heaved to his feet. He squealed sharply, and then it was all right. He was on his feet.

"I thought you were dead up there."

Rennert shook his head. "No such luck. The good, remember? They're the ones who get it young. Guys like me live to be a hund—"

Cornfeld cut him off. To hell with Rennert's wise remarks. "Iris is outside. Both her legs are broken, I think."

"Hey, where is she?" Rennert said, the concern reflected in his deep voice.

Cornfeld knew what was in Rennert's mind, knew it was playing its chess game, five moves ahead, and he knew he was losing again—if he had not *already* lost—as he always lost. He turned away, and limped toward the plot-bucket, slumping into it with a sigh, resting his back. "She's in the shade of a fin out there. I thought you were dead." He knew he was being repetitious, but what did it matter?

"I got wedged into the collar between sections," Rennert ex-

plained, hitching at his jump-shorts. "When the crash came I went out. I came to with a chunk of surfacing plate on my belly.

"I worked it off, and then fainted again. I guess I was just getting free when you started to pile those things up. Noble of you to think of me." He grinned wolfishly.

"Didn't you hope I'd been lost, Corny? Then you could have Iris all to yourself. Even with a pair of busted legs she's a pretty good lay."

"Shut up, will you, Rennert!" Cornfeld turned away, squirming in the chair. Partially because he could see the naked unpleasantness of Rennert's character, and partially because what Rennert said was true. He hated himself, at that moment, far more than he hated Rennert.

"Have it your way, Lancelot." And Rennert moved quickly through the rubble to the rent in the hull. He disappeared through it, into the heat of the alien day.

Cornfeld sat very still for some time, wondering.

Night had fallen more swiftly than he had thought possible, out on the dunes. And with the night came a humidity, stealing out of the rank jungle beyond. Deep in there, alien beasts struggled for supremacy, ripped, tore, killed and were, in turn, themselves killed. The stench of it, the sound of it, rose against the night sky, overpoweringly.

Iris Crosse lay against the cooling metal of the fin, her face drawn in the firm light of a lectrotorch stuck to the hull. Her legs had been tended with plastic splints from the first aid kit, and with the poultice Cornfeld had given Rennert to apply, there was no doubt her bones would knit properly in a few weeks.

But for now, her strength was drained, her blood ran slowly, there was a coolness about her.

Rennert crouched over a makeshift brazier from the ship's stores, cooking three strip steaks. Cornfeld was behind them, directly in the light of the torch, tinkering with the inverspace radio. Finally, as the scent of the jungle mingled alarmingly with the odors of the cooking steaks, he straightened and said, "I'm afraid we won't be stranded here after all. It works just fine. It was cushioned on its buffers, didn't even shake loose a circuit. All I have to do is call back to the

relay station on Point George, let them know we're here, and they'll send out a beacon ship for us."

Iris raised her dark eyes to him, and the faint edge of a smile crossed her thin lips. Cornfeld felt ill at ease. "That's good," she said.

Rennert's masculine chuckle floated to them across the shadows, and he gave a massive halloo. "We're saved!" he clowned. "Saved from the ravages of the alien world!" His hand dipped toward the brazier, and when the fork came up, a deeply-charred strip steak dangled from the tines. "But right now . . . soup's on!"

Cornfeld was left to take his own as Rennert slapped steaks on disposable platters and moved next to the woman. Even though their relationship was one built on hatred and lust, Cornfeld knew he could be nothing to either of them. Not buffer, not catalyst, not deterrent, nothing. To them, he was there/not there.

Finally, because it seemed he must say *something*, so contained were they in their little game of no-notice, Cornfeld ventured: "I'll call Point George."

Neither answered him. Iris Crosse looked up with a half-smile that said do what you wish if you wish, more of condescension than interest. Rennert did not bother to leave his food for a moment.

Finally, with effort, for they watched him without watching, Cornfeld rose, setting aside the platter, and said, "I'll call them now." He picked up the radio.

He walked around the rim of the ship, still and deep in the golden sand, and bent to enter the rip in the hull. Something moving at the far right edge of his vision brought him erect, hands on either side of the tear in the metal.

He turned his head quickly, and caught the flicker of it, at the edge of the jungle. What it was, he could not tell in the faint moonlight tattered by the feathery treetops. But it was there. Not heat dancers as he had thought earlier. Something was out there.

Was it danger? It if was, they would find out soon enough. He entered the ship.

He set the inverspace radio into its mounts. It was able to thrust its sorting beams through space (and not-space *between* space). He set it back between two buffer guards, cushioned on all sides. A set of eighteen verniers paraded across its face like an orderly progression of top-hatted men.

Bolted to the face of the machine were computed signals for all the major relay stations on the Rim. Cornfeld ran a stubby finger down the list, pausing at POINT GEORGE to take the reading. He dialed it out and set the range and directional meters to full output. There was little hope of gauging how much matter-interference this planet contained in its soil composition, with the analyzers ruined. He set the inverad at full scope and drive, and clicked it on.

The response was immediate.

Almost immediately, a bounce signal returned and came out strong on the control room's beep system. It was the bounce signal for *standby,* indicating Point George was on the beam, and turning precedence calls over before accepting Cornfeld's.

Cornfeld dialed out a *crash red!* and the precedence signal for *standby* changed to *acceptance immediate.* A voice cut through the signal and rang loud in the control room:

"Point George acceptance. Go ahead. Point George acceptance. We read you, feature strong, signal clear, go ahead."

Cornfeld bent to the speak-tip and spoke in the tones he had been instructed to use over inverad. Calm, detached, authoritative: "This is Surveyship Charlie X-ray Delta niner fi-yive six six calling Point George. Do you read, Point George?"

The voice came back after a split-instant's time-lapse as the message sped through inverspace. "We read you, Charlie X-ray Delta niner five six six. Go ahead."

Cornfeld edged the bucket up closer to the console and passed across his word. "We are down in disabled condition on co-ordinates . . ." he paused a moment to consult the Celestial Atlas for approximate readings, checked the readings with what coursecomp dials were still intact, and fed the data across.

Point George was silent a long minute and then, just as Cornfeld began to wonder if the beam had died, they came back: "Point George to CXD 9566. We have you spotted on the boards. Take easy, mister, got a beamspitter comin' in on you. Figure a week, at the outside. Do you need anything? Medic? Innoc-beads? Just name it, fella."

"We're fine," Cornfeld assured the nameless voice. "Plenty of rations, and no injuries we haven't already ministered to. Do you need any pin-point directions?"

Point George made a ticking sound as though considering his

question, and then asked, "You're the fifth world out from a type G aren't you?"

Cornfeld considered the sun that burned down from the sky each day, and answered, "Right. Type G. I don't know if we're fifth out . . . we were all unconscious when we came in. Is that what your readings on my beam say?"

Point George: "Check."

Cornfeld: "Then that's us. We're on the shore of a pretty big body of water. Jungle beyond the sand. That might help a little."

"It helps a lot, fella. Anything else?"

Cornfeld: "No, that's it. You figure we'll be picked up inside a week?"

Point George: "That's what Clearance just reported. The spitbeam is bouncing now. They had a ship out near Kasca IV. Figure the normal invertime and a week or thereabouts ought to see you on the way back."

Cornfeld: "Thanks a lot, Point George." His voice was ripe with gratitude and undisguised relief, "This is CXD 9566 over and out."

The *cutaway* signal filled the room, and Cornfeld snapped the inverad off. He slumped back in the bucket. For some unreasonable reason, he had been at ease since he had found the inverspace radio intact, knowing they could get through; but only now, with the rescue beamspitter bouncing out to them, was he untensed, secure again. *He realized, abruptly and with a shocking coldness, for the first time in his life, how terrified he was of reality and the confusion of situations in which he was a pawn. Insecure. Frightened. Not weak, but needing order and stability.*

Quiet, peace of mind, order, quiet.

The scream rang out in the night, building, climbing, spiralling till it was choked off by vocal cords that could stretch no tighter. Iris Crosse had seen horror.

The sound paralyzed him for a second, and then he was tripping over broken bits of ship accoutrements, stumbling to the opening in the hull and pausing there, hands frozen on either side of the rip, staring into the dunes.

What had been movement—what had been heat-lightning or dust shimmering—had now fully materialized, at last revealed itself, was now near enough to be labelled as what it really was.

Ants!

A horde of ants. A wave of ants. A sea, a torrent, a world of ants. A million and another million and a billion ants, tumbled crowded jammed one atop another. An army, drawn up just on the other side of the dune on which Iris Crosse propped against the ship's fin. They were moving and moving and moving, yet they were still. Each creature had individual movement, but the mass was still, not advancing.

Iris Crosse was white in the shadow of the ship's fin. There in the moonlight, her body twitching with uncontrolled horror, her hand fisted between her teeth, her eyes great dark inkblots above alabaster cheeks, the strong woman sat and struggled in the grip of a hundred thousand volts of terror.

"Iris!" Rennart screamed, "Get up! Get up!" He yelled, but he did not move from the two-foot area beyond the opening in the hull. Cornfeld realized, even as Rennert's hysterical shriek cut the night, that Iris *couldn't* move—two splinted legs stretched out before her. But neither did he make the move to rescue her. Both men stood staring at her.

Staring at the sea of ants—or something *like* ants—so near to her. So near to overflowing, to picking her young body clean of flesh and firmness. In his mind, Cornfeld could see the naked land after an attack of the army ants. His mind saw the eyeless sockets jabbed in the skull of what had once been Iris Crosse.

Yet he stood there, unmoving. Why was that?

Then, without any warning, as one, the ants moved.

They surged and churned and roiled and *moved.*

Back into the jungle.

Cornfeld realized someone was giggling hysterically, teeth chattering. The ants were almost entirely gone before he recognized the mad little titter as his own.

After Rennert had gone into the jungle and snatched up a dozen of the ant-like creatures, he brought them back in a specimen cradle, for Iris Crosse's examination.

Her stateroom was split in half. One compartment held living accommodations, and the section behind the accordion-door was a compact laboratory.

It was to this lab that Rennert and Cornfeld carried Iris, their arms locked hand-on-wrist to make a seat for her. The specimen cradle was brought in by Wayne Rennert and deposited beside the woman.

She sat on a high stool, her legs straight out before her, under the bench, awkwardly, as she prepared slides and gauging devices from the clipboards above the bench.

"I'd like to be alone, do you mind?" She did not bother to ask; it was merely an impolite directive. Rennert chuckled nastily and—accidentally?—his arm brushed a stand of test tubes as he went out. They crashed to the deckplate and bounced madly around the laboratory.

He was gone, and Cornfeld, feeling foolish, bent to pick them up. A vague, "Thank you," edged with ice-crystals, came from her, but she did not look up.

He left the laboratory quietly.

The ants returned the next day, and the next. On a short safari paralleling the edge of the sea for a mile, and then into the rim of the dessicated area at the edge of the jungle, Rennert and Cornfeld saw the great hordes many times.

Then, three days after Iris Crosse had begun her experiments on the ants, two things happened.

As they came down the side of a dune, they stopped abruptly, for the golden sands were dark with the ant horde. "Again?" Rennert snorted, and started to turn away.

Cornfeld continued walking. It was something—what?—that made him what could he call it? want to *know* these odd ant-like creatures. He could not put it into words, but there was a drawing from them, to him, and back to them again. He walked toward them slowly.

"What the hell is with you, Cornfeld? You want to get chewed up or something?" He continued to curse, trying to stop Cornfeld, but the shorter man was determined.

"Leave me alone, Rennert. Get away." Rennert tried to land a right cross on Cornfeld's jaw, but the shorter man stepped out of the path of the blow easily.

Then Cornfeld was near enough. A good thirty feet still separated him from the dark inkstain that covered the dunes from the edge of

the sea to the rim of the jungle. But he was near enough.

What was between them . . . what began with the ants . . . and was magnified in him . . . and was returned to the ants . . . was strong enough. A feeling of infinite sadness welled over Cornfeld and

the weeping woman clothed in grey sheets came toward them, her face hung about with monstrous shadows, her features contorted with the sorrow that ate at her. There had been death and sadness unable to be borne. A dam had burst inside her, and the world had lost all light. Oh, God! The misery, the aching, the loneliness and the hunger for no-sorrow. The weeping woman clutched at her streaming hair, and pulled at her cadaverous grey bindings. She stopped, there before the two men—Cornfeld living in the sorrow he felt; Rennert a study in terror as this image came on—and her throat stretched tight as old leather, while her chin turned up to the sun, and her eyes exploded with tears and her mouth's gash was a black entry to nothing. The sorrow boiled and broiled in her, rising to a hysterical pitch, as Cornfeld

felt the sorrow pass, and the woman disappear. Gone!

Rennert's mouth was wide open. That was the first thing Cornfeld saw as the emotion of sadness drained out of him, leaving him vessel-empty, eyes burning. He dropped to his knees, stiffly, and remained there.

"You're crazy!" Rennert sobbed.

as

the madman gibbered across the sands at them. His rags gave off the smell of dung, and his hair was unkempt, flowing about him from head to shoulders, his hands wicked claws that rent the air as he screamed and laughed and cavorted toward them in a frenzy of maniacal destruction. Rennert screamed, and the thought of Cornfeld's insanity faded

to the accompaniment of

the fading of the crazed one. The sand was clean and silent once more, save the dark cancer of the ant horde, still there, still commanding.

"Devils!" Rennert shrieked and

the devils appeared, a horde of them, over a hundred, in the classical connotation of satanism. Red-skinned, horns jutting from foreheads, tails snapping with diamond-pointed barbs at the end . . .

Rennert made a strangled noise, and charged directly into them shrieking, "Hiyahh! Hiyahhh! Hi! Hi!" and began to stomp the ants. Under his boots the tiny creatures were crushed and beaten flat and dark blood drenched his boots. He jumped and leaped, ignoring the devils that milled about, uncertainty furrowing their crimson brows, their pitchforks clutched awkwardly, as though they should have been trumpets or rolling pins. Rennert shrieked insanely, drunk with the fury of hatred for the little creatures that did not move from beneath his crushing onslaught.

The devils disappeared and a great death's head was there, unmoving, with a quizzical expression on its fleshless face.

Cornfeld got to his feet, unstuck the ball peen hammer from his tool-belt, and calmly tracked down the slope of the dune to Rennert's mad thrashings. Hundreds of thousands of ant creatures had been stomped to greasy blackheads against the flesh of the dunes.

Cornfeld grasped the head of the hammer, and clubbed not too gently with the handle—behind Rennert's left ear.

The handsome man slumped forward, his face crushing a few more ants, as the death's head disappeared, and the ant horde moved out. The black shadow of them wallowed across the sand, and into the jungle, and was gone.

Cornfeld replaced the hammer, and stooped to grasp one of Rennert's arms. Carefully avoiding the dark goo that dripped from Rennert's boots, Cornfeld hoisted the pilot to his shoulders.

It was not a long walk to the ship. It only seemed that way.

She was cursing. Her mouth was a thin whip of crimson that flailed Rennert again and again, till her throat could contain no further moisture. Then she stopped and raised ineffectual fists to his ruggedly handsome face.

"Fool!" Vicious beyond compare. "Fool! We've come across something so unbelievable a million years of scientists would trade their souls and skills to see it . . . and *you!* you, you *vermin!* You kill them . . . kill them! Step on them as though they *were* ants. God knows how many of them you killed.

"Pray God it wasn't enough to damage the group mind. Because if you did, Wayne Rennert, you maniac! If you did! I'll see you're broken for it."

She subsided, and when it seemed she was finished, she whirled as far as her broken legs would allow, and commanded him, "Come here. Both of you. Just come over here and see this!"

Cornfeld came forward, was stopped by a flat hand against his chest as Rennert moved in front of him. "After me."

Rennert bent to the binocular eyepiece of the instrument.

Rennert looked up with annoyance. "So cut the damned melodrama; what am I supposed to see . . . besides a bug with a crewcut and a hundred eyes?"

"The crewcut—that isn't *hair!* They're sensitivity antennae."

"So?"

"Oh, God!"

"You mean it took you three days to figure out these damned things have antennae where they should have hair?"

"It took me three days to figure out that these bugs—well, they're not really bugs, either, but that's something else again—anyway, it took me three days to realize that each of these creatures is—"

Rennert burst in, snidely. "Sex-starved."

"—part of a group mind," she finished, her dark eyes smoldering with anger now. "Do you understand what I'm saying? Each bug is a segment of the greatest gestalt mind imaginable."

Cornfeld's gasp escaped despite his attempt to stifle it. "You're saying these bugs *think?*"

"That's just what I'm *not* saying. They can't think; they're idiot minds, separately. They have no more thought than the ants they resemble. But put them together, by the thousands, the millions, and they have a means of defense, a means of pseudo-communication."

Cornfeld was gripped with interest, ignoring with pointedness Rennert's snort of humor. "They can communicate? Speech, thought, what?"

She shook her head. "No, they don't have separate thoughts, or even one great group-thought. But put them together, and they become a great mental mirror, absorbing the thoughts and mind-images of any creatures within their range, and they reflect them back, make them almost substantial."

"That was the weeping woman, and the maniac, and the dev—" Cornfeld began. Rennert's snort of disgust cut him off.

"Prove it."

So she proved it. She took three of the ant-like creatures and put them together inside a tiny crystal sphere, under an amalgum of instruments that propagated a blue field of energy. The powers of the creatures were magnified, and after Cornfeld and Rennert had seen the slack-jowled hyena, the whispering wall of water, the three-winged dragonfly that divided into five, and the rubies that grew from air, they accepted what she had said.

That was the second thing that happened that day.

It had become a game.

Cornfeld and Rennert went out often, to test the gestalt reflectivity of the ant-colony mind. At first, as with any new encountering, the ants had not known how to get to the thoughts and mind-images of the Earthmen—which had been the reason they had not seen images the first time the ants came—but their drawing or "grab-power" as Iris called it, strengthened, and they dealt back the thoughts and visions of the two men with ease.

Iris Crosse's legs had nearly knitted. She was still confined to the ship, but she was able to move her legs without too much pain. It was this that caused her spirits to lift, and her manner of speech, which had been distinctly cool and antagonistic, to lighten. She would often not realize it when she called Rennert, "Wayne," or even "hon," and her lapsing into these familiarities—without a similar friendliness to Cornfeld—made him more withdrawn and brooding.

Iris could be heard laughing gaily in her laboratory, after Rennert had returned to her from a Visioning—as the trips had grown to be called—with detailed accounts of what he had done. It was during one of these sessions, late in the evening, that it happened.

Cornfeld was lounging half-in, half-out of the ship, his legs dangling a foot above the warm evening sands. He hardly noticed when Iris Crosse's resonant laughter tinkled hesitantly into awkward silence. But his mind resigned itself, and only subliminally did he hear her annoyed exclamation; another; her request in strained tones that Wayne *stop*. And then Cornfeld heard her scream.

It was that same nightmare, come to haunt him again.

He swung his legs up into the ship, and slammed through the tilting corridor toward the tiny laboratory.

Rennert had not even paid him the compliment of locking the

stateroom. It stood open, and Iris Crosse was in plain sight, lying across her bunk, her chiton about her hips, her hair wild and dark, while she struggled with Rennert between her legs.

Cornfeld came through the doorway at a dead run and laid both hands with a thwack across the bigger man's shoulders. He heaved back, and Rennert's hands untangled themselves from the woman's clothing. He lost balance, and came tumbling back on Cornfeld. Cornfeld stepped to the side; the larger man fell to the deck.

He tried to rise, and Cornfeld brought up his booted foot, catching Rennert across the bridge of the nose. The captain of the ship squealed high and soprano, and fell back, clutching his broken nose. He lay there whimpering.

Iris Crosse sprawled across her bunk; she too whimpered.

Cornfeld stared at them. Both of them. God, how these two deserved each other.

Rennert could not be blamed entirely. She had no doubt flirted and goaded him, till he had lost his sense of right and propriety. But then, had he ever *really* had such a sense? Rennert was not of that cut. She lay there, her legs still splinted in the healing packs, and her white thighs were only cream against the whiter material of the splint-packs.

"You maniac!" Cornfeld found himself yelling at Rennert, lying at his feet. "You maniac! You couldn't wait. You had to try it now, didn't you? You had to have her again before the beamspitter got here, wasn't that it? You scum . . . she's in splints, you scum, in splints yet, can't you see?"

Fury drained through him. He dragged Rennert up by the collar, and forced his head toward the woman, lying disheveled, wracked by sobs, on her bunk.

Then Rennert got to his feet.

His face had crumbled and all expression but self-pity and degradation were gone. His nose was streaming crimson down across his tunic, and he made no effort to staunch the violent flow.

He stared at her an instant, and then, without his head turning, he stared at Cornfeld, livid in his wrath. Without warning, without preamble, he turned and ran from the lab-stateroom, the tool belt tinkling faintly at his waist.

Cornfeld heard his heavy boots go clattering down the decks, and

then there was silence. He stared at the woman for an interminable, obstinately endless second, and then left the cabin.

He found Rennert far over the dunes, silvered like a fish thrown up on a beach, there in the moonlight, standing silent, staring off across the great ocean without a name. In that moment he felt a compassion, a nearness, a warmth and kinship, almost a brotherhood, with this big, amoral man.

He came up behind him, and was about to speak, when he realized abruptly that the ants were there, too. A great living body of them, stretching almost out of sight, from dune to dune, and from jungle's edge to nearly where the great waves hummed into silence on the beach.

He saw Rennert and he saw the ants, and what came to him came unbidden. "Ask *them*, Rennert. Go ahead. Ask *them* what you are. Ask them to show you what you are inside, the image of yourself. Ask them, Rennert."

The big man turned to Cornfeld, and his broken face was shining with blood in the moonlight. He turned slowly back again, and it was so apparent. He was thinking.

The tools on his belt glittered softly in the moonlight.

The ants were all darkness and life . . . and truth.

After it was over, Cornfeld returned to the ship. To wait. The beamspitter had to come now. Fate had delayed it just long enough.

He came into Iris Crosse's stateroom, and she had pulled down her garments, and was lying with eyes closed on the bed. Drained of emotion, he no longer saw her as an object of desire. She was what she was, and he could not hate her.

But neither could he love her.

He wondered if he would love at all, for a great while.

She looked up, then, and her face had dark, dirty rivulets where tears had washed to their end, down her cheeks and into the corners of her mouth.

"Where is he?" she asked.

He did not answer, but turned to the lab table where a book had been turned over to maintain its place. He fingered the book absently.

"Where is he?"

After a pause, he answered, "He won't be coming back."

She stared at him with her wide, dark eyes that had once been beautiful, and could no longer understand. "What do you mean? Where is he?"

"He's dead."

Her mouth opened, and her hand had no place to find peace. It roved to her mouth, her eyes, her throat. Softly: "*You killed him!*"

Cornfeld was not aroused or surprised by her emotions, her tone, her attitude. It fit. It was natural. He shook his head somberly. "No."

"Then tell me, what happened, tell me!" she shrieked, her face the white of death and stillness.

"He killed himself. He used the Phillips head from his tool belt. He stabbed himself in the throat. It took him a long time to die, he—"

Her scream choked away his words. He had been speaking for himself, but her scream was the end of that too.

"Dead! OhmyGod, he killed himself, why, but why, oh God, *why?*"

Cornfeld started to leave.

The beamspitter would be here soon. He could stay in another section of the ship till it arrived, and not have to see her. It would make things easier. And then, when he got back to soil that was familiar, he would go and find some bar to drink in. Some dark bar, where no one knew him, and he could lose his identity thoroughly, for a good long while. But till then, he had to get away from her and the things she would know, that he would tell her.

Her voice stopped him in the doorway. "Why? Why did he do it. You *tell* me!" A little girl demanding to know who had broken her dolly.

He decided, before he went away from her, to kill that little girl; kill her completely. He turned back, and very calmly said:

"He killed himself because the ants showed him what he was. What he really was. As much truth as a man can stand and then some. They showed him the essence of himself."

The dawning of comprehension was not swift enough for him, and he spelled it out with brutal simplicity.

"The ants took his thoughts and his nature, and they fed them back to him as an image. Too much truth, Iris. Too much for a man like Rennert. He couldn't rationalize it when it got that bad; it was the full

picture of how someone else saw him. *He killed himself because they showed him the image of the incarnation of evil."*

And the little girl died, as the man had died, because the realization was there that sometime, before the rescue ship came, she would have to know about herself; she would have to go out there and let the ants show her truth.

And Cornfeld silently prayed he would not do the same.

He went away from her, then; he went to lie down, hoping there was a future, but doubting it; really doubting it.

Now the book starts getting into the nitty-gritty. This is, I think, one of the best stories I've ever written. It is certainly one of the most personally important to me. It saved my sanity. It is a fantasy, of sorts, but a special kind. It is a terror of the mind. In several senses of the phrase. First, because it deals with the nightshade terrain within the thoughts. And second, because the thoughts were mine. This story grew out of a period of emotional stress after the breakup of my second marriage. I was legally separated, living alone in Los Angeles, finding it difficult to get work, and trying to run away from my own inability to cope by the senseless expedient of screwing every woman I could get my hands on. Then I began having a series of dreams; they continued for several months until, in mindless terror, I fled to the typewriter and wrote this story. When I completed it, the dreams were gone, never again to recur. There is much to be said for self-therapy. It may even be instrumental in helping someone nearing The Edge to get straight once more, to rid him of, say, a

Lonelyache

THE FORM OF THE HABIT she had become still drove him to one side of the bed. Despite his need for room to throw out arms, legs in a figure-4, crosswise angled body, he still slept on only one side of the big double bed. The force of memory of her body there, lying huddled on the inside, together cuddled body-into-body, a pair of question marks, whatever arrangement it might have been from night to night—still, her *there*. Now, only the memory of her warmth beside him kept him prisoner on his half. And reduced to memories and physical need for sleep, he retired to that slab of torture as seldom as possible. Staying awake till tiny hours, doing meaningless things, laughing at laughers, cleaning house for himself with

methodical surgical tidiness till the pathology of it made him gibber and caper and shriek within his skull and soul, seeing movies that wandered aimlessly, hearing the vapors of night and time and existence passing by without purpose or validity. Until finally, crushed by the weight of hours and decaying bodily functions, desperately needing recharge, he collapsed into the bed that he loathed.

To sleep on one side only.

To dream his dreams of brutality and fear.

This was the dream, that same damned recurrent dream, never *quite* the same dream—but on the same subject, night after night, chapter after chapter of the same story: as if he had bought a book of horror stories; they would all be on one theme, but told differently; that was the way with this string of darkside visions.

Tonight came number fourteen. A clean-cut collegiate face proudly bearing its wide, amiable grin. A face topped by a sandy brush-cut and light, auburn eyebrows, giving that sophomoric countenance a giggly, innocent vividness instantly conveying friendship. Under other circumstances Paul knew he could be close friends with this guy. *Guy*, that was the word he used, even in the dream, rather than *fellow*, or *man*, or—most accurately—*assassin*. In any other place than this misty nightmare, with any other intent than this one, they might have lightly punched each other's biceps in camaraderie and hey, how the hell are you'd each other. But this was the dream, latest installment, and this college guy was number fourteen. Latest in an endless, competent string of pleasant types sent to kill Paul.

The plot of the dreams was long-since formulated, now merely suggested by rote in the words and deeds of the players (sections indefinite, details muzzy, transitions blurred, logic distorted dream-style): Paul had been a member of this gang, or group, or bunch of guys, whatever. Now they were after him. They were intent on killing him. If they ever came at him in a group, they would succeed. But for some reason that made sense only in the dream, they were assigned the job one by one. And as each sweet human being tried to tip him the black spot, Paul killed him. One after another, by the most detailed, violently brutal and gut-wrenching means available, he killed the killers. Thirteen times they had come against him—these men who were decent and pleasant and dedicated, whom he

would have been proud to call his friends under other circumstances—and thirteen times he had escaped assassination.

Two or three or—once—four in a night, for the past several weeks (and that he had only killed thirteen till now bore witness to the frequency with which he avoided sleep entirely, or crashslept himself into exhaustion so there *were* no dreams).

Yet the most disturbing part of the dreams was the brutalized combat itself. Never a simple shooting or positive poisoning. Never an image that could be re-told when awakening without bringing a look of shock and horror to the face of Paul's confidante. Always a bizarre and minutely-described *affaire de morte*.

One of the assassins had pulled a thin, desperately-sharp stiletto, and Paul had grappled with the man interminably, slashing at his flesh and the sensitive folds of skin between fingers, till the very essence, the very *reality* of death by knife became a gagging tremor in his sleeping body. It was as though the sense, the *feel* of death-in-progress was evoked. More than a dream, it had been a new threshold of anguish, a vital new terror which he would ever after have to support. It was something new to live with. Until finally he had locked the man's hands about the hilt and driven the slim blade into his stomach, deep and with difficulty, feeling it puncture and gash through organs and resisting, rubbery organs. Then pulling it away from the mortally-wounded assassin and (did he, or did he suppose he had) used it again and again, till the other had fallen under the furniture. Another had been battered to his knees and dispatched finally, with a smooth, heavy piece of black statuary. Still another had gone screaming, pushed abruptly (Paul with teeth bared, fang-like, vicious animal) from a ledge, twisting and plunging heavily away. The passion with which he had watched that body fall, the desire in him to *feel* the weight of it going down, had been the disgusting detail of that particular segment. Still another had come at Paul with some now-forgotten weapon, and Paul had used a tire chain on him, first wrapping it tightly about the assassin's neck and twisting till the links broke skin . . . then flaying the unconscious body till there was no life left in it.

One after another. Thirteen of them, two already tonight, and now number fourteen, this pleasant-enough guy with the rah-rah demeanor, and the fireplace poker in his competent hands. The gang

would never let him alone. He had run, had hidden, had tried to avoid killing them by putting himself out of reach, but they always found him. He went at the guy, wrested the poker from him, and jabbed sharply with the pike-tip of it. He was about to envision where he had thrust that blunt-sharp point, when the phone went off and the doorbell rang—simultaneously.

For a screaming instant of absolute terror he lay there flat on his back, the other side of the bed creased only by a small furrow made by his spastic arm as it had flung itself away from him; the other side of the bed that she had inhabited, now untenanted, save for the wispy end-tips of the dream, streaking away as his arm had done.

While the chime and the bell rang in discordant duo.

Having saved him from seeing what damage he had done the collegiate guy's face. Almost like melodious saviors. Rung in by a watchful God who allotted only certain amounts of fear and depravity to each sleeptime. Knowing he would pick up the thread of the dream precisely where he had left off, next time out. Hoping he could stave off sleep for a year, two years, so he would not have to find out how the rah-rah type had died. But knowing he would. Listening to the phone and the doorbell clanging at him. Having let them serve their purposes of wakening him, now fearing to answer them.

He flipped onto his stomach and reached out a hand in the darkness that did not deter him. He grabbed the receiver off its rest and yowled, "Hold it a minute, please," and in one movement flipped aside the clammy sheet, hit the floor and surely fumbled his way to the door. He opened it as the chime went off again, and in the light from the hallway saw only a shape, no person. He heard a voice, made no sense of it, and said impatiently, "C'min, c'min already for Chri'sake an' shut the door." He turned away and went back to the bed, picked up the receiver he had tossed onto the pillow, and cleared phlegm from his throat as he asked, "Yeah, okay now, who's this?"

"Paul. Has Claire gotten there, is she there yet?" He felt bits of rock-salt in the corners of his eyes, and fingered them tighter into the folds of flesh as he tried to place the voice. It was someone he knew, a friend, someone—

"Harry? That's you, Harry?"

On the other end of the line, way out there in the night somehow,

Harry Dockstader swore lightly, quickly. "Yeah, me, me already. Paul, is Claire there?"

Paul Reed was suddenly assaulted by the overhead light going on, and he snapped his eyes shut against the blaze, opened them, closed them again, and then finally popped them open completely to see Claire Dockstader standing at the switch by the front door.

"Yeah, Harry, she's here," then the weirdness of her being here came to him fully, and he demanded, "Harry, what the hell is going on, Claire's over here, why isn't she with you? Why's she here?"

It was an inane conversation, totally devoid of sense, but his synapses were not yet in focus. "Harry?" he repeated.

The voice on the other end snarled, gutturally.

Then Claire was coming across the room at him, wrathful and impatient, ferocious in demanding, "*Give me that* phone!" Each word sharply enunciated, much too fine for this hour of the morning, each syllable clear and harsh and very thin-lipped, only a woman's way. "Give me that phone, Paul. Let *me* talk to him . . . hello, Harry? You sonofabitch, go straight to fucking hell, die you bastard! Ooo, you *bas*-tard!"

And she literally flung the receiver onto the rest.

Paul sat on the edge of the bed, feeling himself naked from the waist up, feeling the rug under his bare feet, feeling that *no* woman should use language like that at this hour. "Claire . . . *what* the hell is going *on*?"

She stood trembling for a moment, valkyric in her fury, then stalked, half-stumbled, fell across the room into the easy chair. Upon touching the seat she burst into tears. "Ooo, the *bas*-tard," she repeated, not to Paul, not to the silent phone, to the air perhaps. "That lousy chaser, that skunk and his chippies, those *bums* he brings up to the house, Oh God Why'd I Ever Marry That Skunk!"

It was, of course, all laid out for Paul in that sentence, even without the particulars, even at that hour, and the ring of his own recent past was so clear he winced. The word *chaser* did it. His own sister had called him that when she'd heard he and Georgette were divorcing. That damned word: *chaser*. He could still hear it. It had hurt.

Paul rose from bed. The one-and-a-half in which he managed to live (now) alone suddenly seemed close and muggy with a woman in it. "Claire, want some coffee?"

She nodded, still running through her thoughts like prayer beads, eyes turned inward. He moved past her into the tiny kitchenette. The electric coffeepot was on the sideboard, and he hefted it, shoot it to see if there was enough left from the last brewing. A heavy sloshing reassured him, and he plugged in the cord.

As he returned to the living room, her eyes followed him. He dropped onto the bed and slid upward, bracing the pillow behind him. "Okay," Paul said, reaching for the cigarettes beside the phone, "lay it on me. Who was it this time, and how far along were they when you caught him?"

Claire Dockstader pursed her lips so tightly, dimples appeared in her cheeks. "Only a philanderer like you, as bad as Harry, just as big a Skunk, could put it that way!"

Paul shrugged. He was a long, lean man with a thatch of straw-colored hair; he raked the hair off his forehead and applied himself to lighting the cigarette. He didn't want to look at her. A thing in his living room, soon after Georgette, too soon, even a friend's wife. He pulled at the cigarette, and at his thoughts: neither satisfied. He seemed too long for the bed, ungainly, hardly of interest to a woman, yet apparently it was not so, for she stared at him differently now. A subtle shifting of mood in the room, as though she had suddenly realized she had not only broken into his living room, but into his bedroom as well, a room in which other things than just living were done. They were very close, but held apart by a circumstance that both realized might at any moment melt. Uncomfortable, suddenly, both of them. He pulled up the sheet to his waist; she looked away.

Coffee perking, popping, distracting, thank God.

"Christ, what time is it?" Paul asked (himself, in self-defense, more than her). He pulled the travalarm from the nightstand and stared into its face, its idiot face, as though the numbers meant something. "Jeezus, Jeezus, three ayem, Jeezus; don't you people ever sleep?" He was a pot, calling a kettle black. He never slept, never really went to bed, so who was he fooling with this line out of suburban rote?

She shifted in the easy chair, rearranging her skirt that had ridden up over her knees, and Paul once more marveled at the joys of the current hemlines, if one was a leg man, which he had decided with the advent of the current hemlines, he was. She caught his stare and

toyed with it for a moment, then allowed it to vaporize in her own eyes, not just yet returning his proposition.

It was happening, just this easily. A pact of guilt and opportunity was being solidified, without the decency of either admitting its necessity. Paul had been separated not nearly long enough to attempt morality of a high order, and Claire was still burning with outrage. Neither would say the name of the game, but both would play, and both knew it would happen.

And as soon as Paul Reed admitted his loneliness, his guilt and his desires were compounding to produce (why fool around, name it!) adultery, an act of love performed without the catalyst of love, something unpleasant began to happen in the empty, dark, far corner of the room.

He was unaware of its beginnings.

"Why did you pick me for your flight?" he asked flippantly.

"You were the only one I could think of who'd be awake this late . . . and I wasn't thinking too clearly . . . I was too furious to think straight." She stopped talking; she had said much more than what she had said. Of all the places she might have gone, of all the seedy bars where she might have been picked up and laid in retaliation, of all the married friends she and Harry had accrued, of all the cheap hotels where an innocent night of sleep might be purchased for five dollars, she had picked Paul and his living room that was a bedroom that was a hole in the world where guilt could be born out of frustration and pain.

"Is that, uh, coffee ready?" she asked.

He slid out of bed, nakedly aware of her eyes on his body, and went into the kitchenette. He ached in places he did not want to ache, and knew what was going to happen, for all the wrong reasons, and knew he would despise not only her and himself when it had been done, when they had killed something between them, but that he would barely think of it again. He was wrong.

When he handed her the coffee cup, their hands touched, and their eyes locked for the first time in this new way, and the cyclic movement began for the millionth time that night. And once begun, the cycle could not be impeded.

While slowly, steadily, in the dark corner, what had begun to

happen, nasty as it was, went unnoticed. Their insensate passion a midwife at that strange birth.

Simply the mechanics of divorce were gristmill enough to powder him into the finest ash. Simply the little pains of walking through the apartment where they had bumped into one another constantly, the lawyer talks, the serving of the papers, the phone calls that lacked any slightest tinge of communication, the recriminations, and worst of all, the steadily deteriorating knowledge that somehow what had gone wrong was not real, but a matter of thoughts, attitudes, dreams, ghosts, vapors. All insubstantial, but so omnipresent, so *real,* they had broken up his marriage with Georgette. As if they *were* substantial, rock-hard, real, physically tearing her from his arms and his thoughts and his life. Phantom raiders from both of their minds, whose sole purpose in life was to shrivel and shred and shatter their union. But the thoughts and vapors and grey images persisted, and he existed alone in the one-and-a-half where they had set up their gestalt, while she cast the runes and murmured the incantations and boiled up the mystic brews, all set down so precisely in the grimoire of divorce. And as the pattern of separation progressed, a boulder racing mindlessly downhill, needing only the most impossible strength imaginable to halt its crushing rush, his life set itself up in a new sequence, apart from her, yet totally motivated by her existence, and the reality of her absence.

Earlier that day he had received a phone call from her. One of those backbiting, bitter, flame-colored conversations that ended in him telling her to go to hell, she wasn't getting any more money out of him till the settlement, and he didn't give a damn *how* badly she needed it.

"The Court said sixty-five a month separate maintenance, and that's all you're getting. Stop buying clothes and you'll have enough to live on."

Chittering reply from the other end.

"Sixty-five baby, that's *it!* You're the one who moved out, not me; don't expect me to support your nutty behavior gratis. We're through, Georgette, get that through your platinum head, we're all done. I've had it with you! I'm fed up with all the dirty dishes in the

sink, and your subway phobia, and not being able to touch your goddam hair after you've been to the beauty parlor and—oh, crap, why bother with all this . . . the answer is . . ."

Chittering interruption, vitriol electrically transmitted, hatred telephonically magnified, poured directly into his mind through his ear.

". . .*yeah?* Well, the same to you, you stupid simpleass broad, the same *double* to you. Go to hell! You're not getting any more money out of me till the settlement, and I don't give a damn *how* badly you need it!"

He had slammed the receiver back on the stand, and continued getting dressed for his date. When he had picked up the girl, a brunette he had met in his insurance agent's office, a secretary there, it was as though he was collecting unemployment, getting something to which he was entitled, but that nonetheless smacked faintly of being on relief.

Picking up this girl for the first time was precisely like collecting unemployment. Enough to keep him going, but not nearly enough to sustain him in a supportable life. A dole. A pittance, but desperately necessary. A casual girl, with a life of her own, whose path would cross his this once, and then they would stumble past, down their own roads forever, light-footed, unlighted, interminably.

"I'm afraid I won't be very charming company tonight," he told her as she slid into the car. "A woman who looks very much like you gave me considerable heartache today."

"Oh?" she inquired guardedly. It was their first date. "Who would that be?"

"My ex-wife," he said, telling her the first lie. He had not looked at her, save when he reached across to open the door. Now he stared dead-straight ahead as he pulled the unpolished Ford away from the curb and swung it into traffic.

She sat looking at him speculatively, wondering if accepting a dinner date with an office client was such a good idea after all, no matter *how* engaging a sense of humor he had. His face was not at all the youthful cleverness he had presented to her on those three occasions when he had come to the insurance office. It was a harder substance, somehow, as though whatever light, frothy matter had been its basic component previously, had congealed, like week-old

gravy. He was unhappy and disturbed, of course, there was that in abundance; but something else skittered on the edge of his expression, a somnolence, and she was strangely frightened by it—though she was certain it meant harm not for her, but on the contrary, very much for him.

"Why do you let her give you heartache?" she asked.

"Because I still love her, I suppose," he answered, a bit too quickly, as though he had rehearsed it.

"Does *she* love you?"

"Yeah, I guess she does." He paused, then added in a contemplative monotone, "Yeah. I'm quite certain she does. Otherwise we wouldn't try to kill each other so hard. It's making us both very sick, her loving me."

She straightened her skirt and tried to find another passage through the conversation, but all she could think was, *I should have told him I was busy tonight.*

"Do I look very much like her?"

He stared straight ahead, handling the wheel casually, as though very certain, very sure of it, as though he derived a deep inner satisfaction from driving, from propelling all this weight and metal precisely as he wished. It was as though he was with her, yet very far away, locked in an embrace with his vehicle.

"Oh, not really, I suppose. She's blonde, you're brunette. Just around the temples, maybe, and your hair, the way you wear it pulled back on the side that way, and the skin around your eyes crinkled the same way. That, and the tone of your skin. Something like that; more re*minds* me of her than any actual look-alike."

"Is that why you asked me out?"

He thought about it a moment, pressing his full lips together, then replied, "No. That wasn't it. In fact, when I realized that you reminded me of her, I wanted to call the office and break the date."

I wish you had, she thought severely, *I wish I weren't here. With you.*

"We don't have to go, you know."

He turned his head, then, seemingly startled. "What? Oh, say, *hell* I didn't mean to depress you. This thing has been going on for months, and it's just one of those miserable problems that has to work itself out. Don't think I was trying to wriggle out of buying you a meal."

"I didn't think *that*," she replied coolly. "I merely thought you might want to be alone this evening."

He smiled, a strained little smile that was half frown and part sneer, and moved his head slightly. "Christ! Anything but *that*. Not alone. Not tonight."

She settled back against the vinyl seat cover, determined suddenly to make him uncomfortable, in defense.

What seemed to each of them like elastic hours stretched past, and then he said, in an altogether new tone of voice, a forced light tone each knew was false, "Where would you like to go? Chinese? Italian? I know a nice little Armenian restaurant . . .?"

She was silent, purposefully, and it *served* its purpose; he was uncomfortable, unhappier than before, and in the next instant it passed and he felt hateful, outright nasty, wanting to either get her into bed at once, or dump her, but not have to suffer this way through an entire evening. And so she defeated herself, as the rock wall slid up to cover the gentleness he would have demonstrated later that night. Deviousness replaced gentleness, sadness.

"Listen," he said smoothly (once again, a new tone, a lacquer-finished tone, chromed and slick), lightly, "I didn't get a chance to shave before I picked you up, and I feel like a slob. You mind if we stop off for a minute at my place, and I'll run a razor over my face?"

She was not fooled. She had been married once, had been divorced, had been dating since she was fifteen, she knew *exactly* what he was saying. He was offering a private demonstration of his etchings. Her mind turned the offer slowly, examining it—in that breathless eternity of a moment in which all decisions are made—and studying each shimmering facet. She knew it was a bad idea, had no merit in any way, that she was a fool to think seriously of it, and that he would back off if she made the slightest sound of disapproval. True true, a bad idea, one to reject on the spot, and she rejected it. "All right," she said.

He turned sharply at the next corner.

He looked down at her face, and abruptly saw her at the age of sixty-five. He knew with a crystal certainty what she would look like when she was old. Super-imposed over the pale-and-pink firm immediacy of her face framed against the pillow, he saw a grey

line-mask of the old woman she would one day become. The mouth with its stitchlines, tiny pickets running down into the lips; the dusty hollows lurking beneath the eyes; dark spaces in the character lines and in the planes of expression—as though whole sections had been sold off to retain life, even at the cost of losing appearance. The sooty patina covering the flesh, much like that left when a moth has been crushed, the powdery fine ash of its wings imprinting the surface on which the death had occurred. He stared down at her, seeing the double-image, the future lying inchoate across her now-face, turning the paramour beneath him into a relic of incognito spare parts and empty passions. A dim, drenched cobweb of probability, there in the eye-sockets, across the mouth he had kissed, radiating out from the nostrils and pulsing ever so faintly in the hollow of her throat.

Then the vision melted off her young face, and he was looking at the creature of empty purposes he had just used. There was a mad, insane light flickering out of her eyes. "Tell me you love me, even if you don't mean it," she murmured huskily.

There was a hungry urgency, a breathless demand in her voice, and a fist closed around his heart as she spoke, a chill ruined his aplomb, his grasp of the present, so recently returned to him. He wanted to pull out of her, away from her, as far as he could, and crouch down somewhere in the bedroom in a patient, foetal security.

But the corner of the room he might have chosen was already occupied. Darkly occupied by bulk and a sinister presence. The breathing in that corner was coming laboredly, but much more regularly than before; it seemed to have become more steady, pulsing, as they had entered the apartment; and during the parry and counter and riposte of their encounter it had metro nomically hurried itself to a level of even oftenness. Oh, it was taking form, form, form.

Paul sensed it, but discounted the instinct.

Deep breathing, stentorian, labored—but becoming more regular.

"Tell me. Tell me you love me, nineteen times, very fast."

"I love you I love you I love you I love you," he began rattling them off, propped on one elbow, counting them on the fingers of his left hand. "I love you I love you I luh—"

"Why are you counting them?" she demanded, coquettishly, in a bizarre grotesque parody of naiveté.

"I don't want to lose track," he answered, brutally. Then he slipped sidewise, falling onto his back, on Georgette's side of the bed (feeling uncomfortable there, as though the ridges and whorls of her body were imprinted there, making it lumpy for him, but with the determination not to let *this* girl lie on *that* side). "Go to sleep," he instructed her.

"I don't want to go to sleep."

"Then go bang your goddam head against the wall," he snapped. Then he was forcing himself to sleep. Eyes closed, knowing how angry the girl beside him had become, he commanded sleep to come, and timorously, fawn-like in a deep foreboding forest, it came, and touched him. So that he began to dream again. *That* dream, again.

In the eye, the right eye. The point of the poker entered, did its damage, came away foul. Paul flung himself violently from the sight, even as the crew-cut young man toppled suddenly past him, still alive somehow, crawling, dying by every bit of flesh through every rotting second. Starlight and darkness slipped by overhead as Paul whirled, spun, found himself in another place. A plaza, perhaps . . .

A crowd, down the smart sleek shop-bordered street—a posh street (where?) in Beverly Hills, perhaps, glistening and elegant, and seeming almost dazzlingly clean with rhodium-finished permanence—growling, coming toward him.

They were masked, caricatured, made up for some weird mardi gras, or costume party, or gathering of witches, where real faces would reveal real persons, and thus provide a grasp for their damnation. Strangers, boiling hurling sweeping down the street toward him in a chiaroscuro montage of chimerical madness. A vision out of Bosch; a bit of underdone potato or undigested Dali, hurled forth from a dream-image by Hogarth; a pantomime out of the innermost circle of Dante's Inferno. Coming for him. For him.

At last, after all these weeks, the dream had broken its pattern, and the massed terrors were now coming for him in a body. No longer one at a time, man-for-man in that never-ending succession of pleasant assassins. Now they had gathered together, grotesque creatures, masked and hungry.

If I can figure out what this means, I'll know, he thought suddenly. In the midst of the multi-colored haze of the dream, he knew

abruptly, certainly, that if he could just make some sense from the events unreeling behind his eyes (and he *knew* it was a dream, right then), there would be a key to his problems, a solution that would work for him. So he concentrated. *If I can just understand who they are, what they're doing here, what they want from me, why they won't let me escape, why they're chasing me, what it takes to placate them, to get away from them, who I am who I am who I am . . . then I'll be free, I'll be whole again, this will be over, this will end, it'll end . . .*

He ran down the street, the white clean street, and dodged in and among the cars that had suddenly appeared in lines, waiting for the light to change. He ran down the street to the intersection, and cut across among the slowly-moving vehicles, terror clogging his throat, his legs aching from the running, seeking an escape, an exit, *any* exit—a place of rest, of security where he could close the door and know they could not get in.

"Here! We'll help you," a man shouted from a car, where he was packed in with his family, many children. Paul ran to the car, and the man opened his door, and Paul managed to crowd past him as he pulled the seat back, offering entrance to the back seat. Paul squeezed through, pushing the man up against the steering wheel. Then the seat was dropped back, Paul was in the rear with the children, and the car was piled with (what? fuzzy, indistinct) clothes, or soft possessions that the children sat on, and he was forced to lie down across the back deck, under the rear window

(but how could that be?

(he was a full-grown man, he couldn't squeeze himself into that small a space, the way he had when he had been a child and gone on trips with his mother and father and laid down under the back window because the back seat was filled up, the way it had been when his father had died, and he had gone away with his mother from their home to the new home . . .

(why did that memory suddenly come through so lucidly?

(was he a grown man, or a small child?

(*please* answer!)

and he could see out the back window, and the crowd of terrifying masked figures, bright-eyed and haunting, were being left behind. Still, somehow, he did not feel safe! He was with the ones who could

help, that man driving, he was strong and would drive fast through the traffic, and save Paul from the haunters, but why didn't he feel safe . . . why?

He woke, crying. The girl was gone.

There was one who chewed gum while they did it. An adolescent with oily thighs who had no idea of how to live in her body. The act was sodden and slow and entirely derelict in its duties. Afterward, he thought of her as a figment of his imagination, leaving only her laugh behind.

She had a laugh that sounded like pea pods snapping open. He had met her at a party, and her attractiveness stemmed chiefly from too many vodkas and tonics.

Another one was completely lovely, and yet, she was the sort of woman who gave the impression, upon entering a room, of having just left it.

One was small and slight and shrieked for no reason save that she had read how passionate women screamed at the climax—in a bad book. Or more aptly, an undistinguished book, for she was an undistinguished woman.

One after another they came to that one-and-a-half, casual adulteries without purpose or direction, and he indulged himself, again and again, finally realizing (by what was taking shape in the corner) what he was doing to himself, and his life that was no longer a life.

Genesis refers to sin that coucheth at the door, or croucheth at the door, and so this was no new thing, but old, so very old, as old as the senseless acts that had given it birth, and the madness that was causing it to mature, and the guilty sorrow—the lonelyache—that would inevitably cause it to devour itself and all within its sight.

On the night that he actually paid for love, the night he physically reached into his wallet and took out two ten dollar bills and gave them to the girl, the creature took full and final shape.

This girl: when "good girls" talk about "tramps" they mean this girl and her sisters. But there are no such things as "tramps" and even the criminal never thinks of himself in those terms. Working-girl, entrepreneur, renderer of services, smarty, someone just getting along . . . these are the ways of her thoughts. She has a family, and she has a past, and she has a face, as well as a place of sex.

But commercialism is the last sinkhole of love, and when it is reached, by paths of desperation and paths of cruel, misused emotions—all hope is gone. There is no return save by miracles, and there are no more miracles for the common among common men.

As he handed her the money, wondering why in God's name, *why!* the beast in the corner by the linen closet took its final shape, and substantiality, reality was its future. It had been called up by a series of contemporary incantations, conjured by the sounds of passion and the stink of despair. The girl snapped her bra, covered herself with dacron and decorum, and left Paul sitting stunned, inarticulate with terror in the presence of his new roommate.

It stared at him, and though he tried to avert his eyes (screams were useless), he stared back.

"Georgette," he said huskily into the mouthpiece, "listen . . . lis, *listen* to me, willya, for Christ's sake . . . st, stop *blab*bering for a second, willya, just, just SHUT UP FOR ONE GODDAM SECOND! willya . . ." she finally subsided, and his words, no longer forced to slip themselves piecemeal between hers, left standing naked and alone with nothing but silence confronting them, ducked back within him, shy and trembly.

"Well, go *on*" he said, reflexively.

She said she had nothing further to say; what was he calling her for, she had to get ready to go out.

"Georgette, I've got, well, I've got this uh this problem, and I had to *talk* to someone, you were the one I figured would understand, y'see, I've uh—"

She said she didn't know an abortionist, and if he had knocked up one of his bummy-girls, he could use a goddam coat-hanger, a *rusty* coat-hanger, for all she cared.

"No! No, you stupid ass, that isn't anything like what I'm scared about. *That* isn't it, and who the hell do you care who I date, you tramp . . . you're out on the turf enough for *both* of us . . ." and he stopped. This was how all their arguments had started. From subject to subject, like mountain goats from rock to rock, forgetting the original discussion, veering off to rip and tear with their teeth at each other's trivialities.

"Georgette, *please!* Listen to me. There's a, there's a thing, some kind of *thing* living here in the apartment."

She thought he was crazy, what did he mean?

"I don't know. I don't know what it is."

Was it like a spider, or a cat, or what?

"It's like a bear, Georgette, only it's something else, I don't know what. It doesn't say anything, just *stares* at me—"

What was he, cracking up or something? Bears don't talk, except the ones on TV, and what was he, trying to pull off a nut stunt so he wouldn't have to pony up the payments the court set? And why was he calling her in the first place, closing with: I think you're flipping, Paul. I always said you were a whack, and now you're proving it.

Then the phone clicked, and he was alone.

Together.

He looked at it from the corner of his eye as he lit a cigarette. Hunkered down in the far corner of the room, near the linen closet, the huge soft-brown furry thing that had come to watch him, sat silently, paws folded across its massive chest. Like some great Kodiak bear, yet totally unlike it in shape, the truncated triangle of its bloated form could not be avoided—by glance or thought. The wild, mad golden discs of its eyes never turned, never flickered, while it watched him.

(This description. Forget it. The creature was nothing like that. Not a thing like that at all.)

And he could sense the reproach, even when he had locked himself in the bathroom. He sat on the edge of the tub and ran the hot water till steam had obscured the cabinet mirror over the sink and he could no longer see his own face, the insane light in his eyes so familiar, so similar to the blind stares of the creature in the other room. His thoughts flowed, ran, lava-like, then congealed.

At which point he realized he had never seen the faces of any of the women who had been in the apartment. Not one of them. Faceless, all of them. Not even Georgette's face came to him. None of them. They were all without expression or recall. He had been to seed with so many angular corpses. The sickness welled up in him, and he knew he had to get out of there, out of the apartment, away from the creature in the corner.

He bolted from the bathroom, gained the front door without

breaking stride, caroming off the walls, and was laying back against the closed slab of hardwood, dragging in painful gouts of air before he realized that he could not get away that easily. It would be waiting for him when he got back, whenever he got back.

But he went. There was a bar where they played nothing but Sinatra records, and he absorbed as much maudlin sorrow and self-pity as he could, finally tumbling from the place when the strings and the voice oozed forth:

How I wish I could forget
Those happy yesteryears,
That have left
A rosary of tears.

There was another place, a beach perhaps, where he stood on the sand, silent within himself, as the gulls wheeled and gibbered across the black sky, kree kree kree, driving him a little more mad, and he dug his naked hands into the sand, hurling great clots of the grainy darkness over his head, trying to kill those rotten, screaming harridans!

And another place, where there were lights that said things, all manner of unintelligible things, neon things, dirty remarks, and he could not read any of them. (In one place he was certain he saw the masked revelers from his dream, and frothing, he fled, quickly.)

When he returned, finally, to the apartment, the girl with him swore she wasn't a telescope, but yeah, sure, she'd look at what he had to show her, and she'd tell him what it was. So, trusting her, because she'd said it, he turned the key in the door, and opened it. He reached around the jamb and turned on the light. Yeah, yeah, there he was, there he was, that thing there he was, all right. Uh-huh, there he is, the thing with the staring eyes, there he is.

"Well?" he asked her, almost proudly, pointing.

"Well what? she replied.

"Well what about *him?*"

"Who?"

"*Him,* him, you stupid bitch! Him right *there!* HIM!"

"Y'know, I think you're outta your mind, Sid."

"M'name's not Sid, and don't tell me you don't see him, you lying sonofabitch!"

"Say lissen, you *said* you was Sid, and Sid you're gonna be, and I

don't see *no* goddam nobody there, and if you wanna get laid allright, and if you don't, just say so and we'll have another drink an' that'll be *that!*"

He screamed at her, clawing at her face, thrusting her out the door. "Get out, get outta here, g'wan, get out!" And she was gone, and he was alone again with the creature, who was unperturbed by it all, who sat implacably, softly, waiting for the last tick of time to detach itself and fly free from the fabric of sanity.

They trembled there together in a nervous symbiosis, each deriving something from the other. He was covered with a thin film of horror and despair, a terrible lonelyache that twisted like smoke, thick and black within him. The creature giving love, and he reaping heartache, loneliness.

He was alone in that room, the two of them: himself and that soft-brown, staring menace, the manifestation of his misery.

And he knew, suddenly, what the dream meant. He knew, and kept it to himself, for the meaning of dreams is for the men who dream them, never to be shared, never to be known. He knew who the men in the dreams were, and he knew now why none of them had ever been killed by simple gun. He knew, diving into the clothes closet, finding the duffle bag full of old Army clothes, finding the chunk of steel that lay at the bottom of that bag. He knew who he was, he knew, he knew, gloriously, jubilantly, and he knew it all, who the creature was, and who Georgette was, and the faces of all the women in the damned world, and all the men in the damned dreams, and he had it all, right there, right in his hands, ready to be understood.

He went into the bathroom. He was *not* going to let that bastard in the corner see him succeed. He was going to savor it himself. In the mirror he now saw himself again. He saw the face and it was a good face and a very composed face, and he stared back at himself smiling, saying very softly, "Why did you have to go away?"

Then he raised the chunk of steel.

"Nobody, absolutely nobody," he said, holding the huge .45 up to his face, "has the guts to shoot himself through the eye."

He laid the hollow bore of the great blocky weapon against his closed eyelid and continued speaking, still softly. "Through the head, yeah sure, anybody. Or the guys with balls can point it up through the mouth. But through the eye, nobody, but *no*body." Then he pulled

the trigger just as they had taught him in the Army; smoothly, evenly, in one movement.

From the other room came the murmur of breathing, heavily, stertorously, evenly.

Ted Sturgeon has said some strange things about this story in the Introduction to this book. He has said it is hallucinogenic in tone. He may be right, I don't know. I wrote it as a straight attempt at mysticism. But the style was experimental, as well. I employed a Baroque, even rococo approach. I wanted a density of images, a veritable darkness of language, comparable in narrative to what saxophonist John Coltrane blows in his "sheets of sound" style. That is, a laying on thickly of impressions, one atop another, like the scales of an armadillo. It was published in Knight, *and it is the one time an editor snipped something out of it. Without my knowledge. Now, it is in its original version, and I think I see what Ted meant. It strikes me as a weird story, and I've never done anything quite like it, before or since. But as for the whole acid-head bag–and by relation, pot and peyote and hash and mescalin and pill-dropping of all kinds–Ted's reportage of my attitude was precisely correct. Why should I clown around with all the artificial scenes when I've been on a continual high since the day I was born. I'll take my first fix or sugar cube when I come down, troops, but that may be a long way off if it is possible for me, unjugged, to write things like*

Delusion for a Dragon slayer

THIS IS TRUE:

Chano Puzo, the incredibly talented conga drummer of the bop '40's, was inexplicably shot and killed by a beautiful Negress in the Rio Cafe, a Harlem bar, on December 2nd, 1948.

Dick Bong, pilot of a P-38 "Lightning" in World War Two, America's "Ace of Aces" with forty Japanese kills to his credit, who came through the hellfire of war unscratched, perished by accident when the jet engine of a Lockheed P-80 he was test-flying "flamed-

out" and quit immediately after takeoff, August 7th, 1945. There was no reason for the mechanical failure, no reason for Bong to have died.

Marilyn Monroe, an extremely attractive young woman who had only recently begun to realize she possessed an acting ability far beyond that of "sex symbol" tagged on her early in her career, on a timeless and dateless day in 1962, left this life as a result of accidentally swallowing too many barbiturates. Despite lurid conjecture to the contrary, the evidence that she had been trying to phone someone for help as the tragedy coursed through her system, remains inescapable. It was an accident.

William Bolitho, one of the most incisive and miraculously talented commenters on society and its psychological motivations, whose "Murder For Profit" revolutionized psychiatric and penological attitudes toward the mentalities of mass-murderers, died suddenly—and again, tragically—in June of 1930, in a hospital in Avignon, victim of the mistaken judgment of an obscure French physician who let a simple case of appendicitis drop into peritonitis.

True.

Each of these four random deaths plucked from a staggering and nearly-endless compendium of "accidental tragedies" have one thing in common. With each other, and with the death of Warren Glazer Griffin. None of them should have happened. Each of them was "out-of-joint" with time and the continuity of the life in point. Each of them catches the breath, boggles the mind. Each of them could have been avoided, yet none of them could have been avoided. For each of them was pre-ordained. Not in the ethereal, mystic, supernatural flummery of the Kismet-believers, but in the complex rhythmic predestination of those who have been whisked out of their own world, into the mist-centuries of their dreams.

For Chano Pozo, it was a dark and smiling woman of mystery.

For Dick Bong, a winged Fury sent to find only him.

For Marilyn Monroe, a handful of white chalk pills.

For Bolitho, an inept quack forever doomed to apologies.

And for Warren Glazer Griffin, a forty-one year old accountant who, despite his advanced age, was still troubled by acne, and who never ventured further from his own world than Tenafly, New Jersey on a visit to relatives one June in 1959, it was a singular death ground to pulp between the triple-fanged rows of teeth in the mouth of a

seventy-eight foot dragon, in a Land That Never Existed.

Wherein lies a biography, an historical footnote, a cautionary tale, and a keynote to the meaning of life.

Or, as Goethe summed it:

"Know thyself? If I knew myself, I'd run away."

The giant black "headache ball" of the wreckers struck the shell of a wall, and amid geysers of dust and powder and lath and plaster and brick and decayed wood, the third storey of the condemned office building crumbled, shivered along its width and imploded, plunging in upon itself, dumping jigsaw pieces into the hollow structure. The sound was a cannonade in the early-morning eight-o'clock street.

Forty years before, an obscure billionaire named Rouse, who had maintained a penthouse love-nest in the office building, in an unfashionable section of the city even then, had caused to be installed a private gas line to the kitchen of the flat; he was a lover of money, a lover of women, and a lover of flaming desserts. A private gas line. Gas company records of this installation had been either lost, destroyed, or—as seems more likely—carefully edited to exclude mention of the line. Graft, as well as bootlegging, had aided Rouse in his climb to that penthouse. The wreckers knew nothing of the gas line, which had long-since gone to disuse and the turnoff of a small valve on the third floor, which had originally jetted the vapor to the upper floor. Having no knowledge of the line, and having cleared all safety precautions with the city gas company as to existing installations, the wreckers hurled their destructive attentions at the third storey with assurance . . .

Warren Glazer Griffin left his home at precisely seven forty-five every weekday except Thursday (on which day he left at eight o'clock, to collect billing ledgers from his firm's other office, further downtown; an office which did not open till 8:15 weekdays). This was Thursday. He had run out of razor blades. That simple. He had had to pry a used blade out of the disposal niche in the blade container, and it had taken him ten minutes extra. He hurried and managed to leave the apartment house at 8:06 A.M. His routine was altered for the first time in seventeen years. That simple. Hurrying down the block to the Avenue, turning right and hesitating, realizing he could not make up the lost minutes by merely trotting (and without even recognizing the

subliminal panic that gripped him at being off-schedule), he dashed across the Avenue, and cut through the little service alley running between the shopping mart, still closed, and the condemned office building with its high board fence constructed of thick doors from now-demolished offices . . .

U.S. WEATHER BUREAU FORECAST: partly cloudy today with a few scattered showers. Sunny and slightly warmer tomorrow (Friday). Gusty winds. High today 62. High Friday 60, low 43. Relative humidity . . .

Forty years past, a billionaire named Rouse.

A desire for flaming desserts.

A forgotten gas main.

A struggle for a used razor blade.

A short cut through an alley.

Gusty winds . . .

The "headache ball" plunged once more into the third storey, struck the bottled-up pressure valve; the entire side of the building erupted skyward on a spark struck by two bricks scratching together, ripping the massive iron sphere from its cable. The ball rose, arced, and borne on an unusually heavy wind, plummeted over the restraining board fence. It landed with a deafening crash in the alley.

Directly on the unsuspecting person of Warren Glazer Griffin, crushing him to little more than pulp, burying him eleven feet through cement and dirt and loam. Every building in the neighborhood shuddered at the impact.

And in several moments, cemetery silence fell once more in the chilly, eight-o-clock morning streets.

A soft, theremin humming, in little circles of sound, from all around him: the air was alive with multi-colored whispers of delight.

He opened his eyes and realized he was lying on the yellow-wood, highly-polished deck of a sailing vessel; to his left he could see beneath the rail a sea of purest vermillion, washing in thin lines of black and color, away behind the ship. Above him the silk and crystal sails billowed in the breeze, and tiny spheres of many-colored light kept pace with the vessel, as though they were lightning-bugs, sent to run convoy. He tried to stand up, and found it was not difficult: except he was now six feet three inches in height, not five foot seven.

Griffin looked down the length of his body, and for a suspended instant of eye-widening timelessness, he felt vertiginous. It was total displacement of ego. He was himself, and another himself entirely. He looked down, expecting to see a curved, pot-bellied and pimpled body he had worn for a very long time, but instead saw someone else, standing down below him, where he should have been. *Oh my God,* thought Warren Glazer Griffin, *I'm not me.*

The body that extended down to the polished deck was a fine instrument. Composed of the finest bronzed skin-tone, the most sculptured anthracite-hard musculature, proportions just the tiniest bit exaggerated, he was lovely and god-like, extremely god-like. Turning slowly, he caught his reflection in the burnished smoothness of a warrior's bronze shield, hung on a peg at the side of the forecastle. He was Nordic blond, aquiline-nosed, steely-blue-eyed. *No one can be that Aryan,* was his only thought, flushed with amazement, as he saw the new face molded to the front of his head.

He felt the hilt of the sword warm against his side.

He pulled it free of its scabbard, and stared in fascination at the face of the old, gnarled marmoset-eyed wizard whose countenance was an intaglio of pitted metal and jewels and sandblast-black briar, there engraved in hard relief on the handle. The face smiled gently at him.

"What it is all about, is this," the wizard said softly, so that not even the sea-birds careening overdecks would hear. "This is Heaven. But let me explain." Griffin had not considered an interruption. He was silent and struck dumb. "Heaven is what you mix all the days of your life, but you call it dreams. You have one chance to buy your Heaven with all the intents and ethics of your life. That is why everyone considers Heaven such a lovely place. Because it is dreams, special dreams, in which you exist. What you have to do is live up to them."

"I—" started Griffin, but the wizard cut him off with a rapid blinking of his strange eyes.

"No, listen, please, because after this, all the magic stops, and you have to do it alone.

"You create your own Heaven, and you have the opportunity to live in it, but you have to do it on your own terms, the highest terms of which you are capable. So sail this ship through the straits, navigate the shoals, find the island, overcome the foam-devil that guards the girl, win her love, and you've played the game on your own terms."

Then the wizard's face settled back into immobility, and Warren Glazer Griffin sat down heavily on the planking of the forecastle, mouth agape, eyes wide, and the realization of it all fixed firmly—unbelievably, but firmly—in his head.

Gee whiz, thought Griffin.

The sound of rigging shrieking like terns brought him out of his middle-class stupor, and he realized the keel of the strange and wonderful wind-vessel was coming about. The steady beatbeatbeat of pole-oars against mirror waters rose to meet the descending hum of a dying breeze, and the ship moved across reflective waters toward a mile-high breaker that abruptly rose out of the sea.

Griffin realized it had not leapt from the sea-bottom, as his first impression seemed to be, but had gradually grown on the horizon, some moments after the watch in the nest had halloo'd its imminent appearance. Yet he had not heard any such gardyloo; he was surfeited with thoughts of this other body, the golden god with the incredibly handsome face.

"Cap'n," said one of the hands, lumbering with sea legs toward him. "We're hard on the straits. Most of the men're shackled a'ready."

Griffin nodded silently, turned to follow the seaman. They moved back toward the lazzarette, and the seaman opened the hatch, dropped through. Griffin followed close behind him, and in the smallish compartment found the other sea-hands shackled wrists and ankles to the inner keel of the hold. He was gagged for a moment by the overpowering stench of salted bully-beef and fish, a sickly bittersweet smell that made his eyes smart with its intensity.

Then he moved to the seaman, who had already fastened his own ankle-shackles, and one wrist-manacle. He clapped the rusting manacle still undone, and now all the hands of the wind-vessel were locked immobile.

"Good luck, Cap'n," smiled the last seaman. And he winked. The other men joined in, in their own ways, with a dozen different accents, some in languages Griffin could not even begin to place. But all well-wishing. Griffin once more nodded in the strong, silent manner of someone other than himself, someone to the rank born.

Then he climbed out of the lazzarette and went aft to the wheel.

Overhead, the sky had darkened to a shining blackness, a patent

leather black that would have sent back inverted reflections, had there been anything soaring close enough to the sky to reflect. In the mote-dancing waters of the ocean, a ghost ship sailed along upside-down, hull-to-hull with Griffin's vessel. And above him the quaint and tittering globes of light ricocheted and multiplied, filling the sudden night with the incense of their vibrancy. Their colors began to blend, to merge, to run down the sky in washes of color that made Griffin smile, and blink and drop his mouth open with awe. It was all the fireworks of another universe, just once hurled into an onyx sky, left to burn away whatever life was possible. Yet that was merely beginning:

The colors came. As he set his feet squarely, and the deltoids bunched furiously beneath his golden skin, the two men who were Warren Glazer Griffin began the complex water slalom that would send the vessel through the straits, past the shoals, and into the cove that lay beyond. And the colors came. The vessel tacked before the wind, which seemed to gather itself and enter in an arrowed spear pointed direction of unity, behind the massive sails. The wind was with him, sending him straight for the break in the heartless stone barrier. Out the colors came.

Softly at first, humming, creeping, boiling up from nowhere at the horizon line; twisting and surging like snake whirlwinds with adolescent intent; building, spiraling, climbing in vague streamers and tendrils of unconsciousness, the colors came.

In a rising, keening spiral of hysteria they came, first pulsing in primaries, then secondaries, the conminglings and off-shades, and finally in colors that had no names. Colors like racing, and pungent, and far seen shadows, and bitterness, and something that hurt, and something that pleasured. Oh, mostly the pleasures, one after another, singing, lulling, hypnotically arresting the eye as the ship sped into the heart of the maelstrom of weird, advancing, sky-eating colors. The siren colors of the straits. The colors that came from the air and the island and the world itself, which hushed and hurried across the world to here, to meet when they were needed, to stop the seamen who slid over the waves to the break in the breakwall. The colors, defense, that sent men to the bottom, their hearts bursting with songs of color and charm. The colors that top-filled a man to the brim and kept him poised there with a surface tension of joy and

wonder, colors cascading like waterfalls of flowers in his head, millioncolors, blossomshades, brightnesses, joycrashing everythings that made a man hurl back and strain his throat to sing sing, sing chants of amazement and forever—

—as his ship plunged like a cannonball into the reefs and shattered into a billion wooden fragments, tiny splinters of dark wood against the boiling treacherous sea, and the rocks crushed and staved in the sides, and men's heads went to pulp as they hurtled forward and their vessel was cut out from under them, the colors the colors, the God beautiful colors!

As Griffin sang his song of triumph, the men with eyes clapped tightshut, belowdecks, saved from berserking, depending on this golden giant of a man who was their own personal this-trip God, who would bring them through the hole in the faceless evil rocks.

Griffin, singing!

Griffin, golden god from Manhattan!

Griffin, man of two skins, Chinese puzzle man within man, hands cross-locked over the wood of the wheel, tacking points this way, points that way, playing compass and swashbuckler with the deadly colors that lapped at his senses, filled his eyes with delight, clogged his nostrils with the scents of glory, all the tiny theremin hummings now merged, all the little color-motes now united, running in slippery washes down and down the sky as he hurried the vessel toward the rocks and then in one sweep as he spun spun spun the wheel two handed across, whip whip whip, and *through* into the bubbling white water, with rock-teeth screeching old women along the hull of his vessel, and tearing gouged gashes of darker deepness along the planking, but *through!*

Griffin, who chuckled with merriment at his grandeur, his stature, his chance taking, who had risked the lives of all his men for the moment of forever to be gained on that island. And winning! Making his wager with eternity, and winning—for an instant, before the great ship struck the buried reefs, and tore away the bottom of the ship, and the lazzarette filled in an instant, and his men who trusted him not to gamble them away so cheaply, wailed till their screams became water-logged, and were gone, and Griffin felt himself lifted, tossed, hurled, flung like a bit of suet and the thought that invaded, consumed, gnawed him in rage and frustration: that he had defeated

the siren colors, had gotten through the treacherous straits, but had lost his men, his ship, even himself, by the treachery of his own self-esteem: that he had gloated over his wonderousness, and vanity had sent him whipping further inshore, to be dashed on reefs; and the bitterness welled in him as he struck the water with a paralyzing crash, and sank immediately beneath the boiling white-faced waves.

Out on the reefs, the wind-vessel, with its adamantine trim, with its onyx and alabaster sails, with its marvelous magical swiftness, sank beneath the waters without a murmur

(unless those silent insane shriegggggngggg wails were the sounds of men shackled helplessly to an open coffin)

and all that could be heard was the pounding war drums of the waves, and the gutted, emptying, shrill keen of an animal whose throat has been slashed—the sound of the colors fading back to their million lairs around the universe, till they would be called again. Then after a while, even the waters smoothed.

Crickets gossiped shamelessly, close beside his head. He awoke to find his eyes open, staring up into a pale, cadaverous paper-thin cut-out that was the moon. Clouds scudding across its mottled slimness sent strange shadows washing across the night sky, the beach, the jungle, Warren Glazer Griffin.

Well, I certainly messed that up, was his first thought, and in an instant the thought was gone, and the Nordic god-man's thoughts superimposed more strenuously. Griffin felt his arms out wide on the white sand, and scraped them across the clinging grains till he was able to jack himself up, straining his back heavily. Propped on elbows, legs spread-eagled before him, he stared out to sea, to the great barrier wall that encircled the island, and scanned the dark expanse for some sign of ship or men. There was nothing. He let his mind linger for long moments on the vanity and ego that had cost so many lives.

Then he climbed painfully to his feet, and turned to look at the island. Jungle rose up in a thick tweedy tangle, as high as the consumptive moon, and the warp of dark vine tracery merged with a woof of sounds. Massed sounds, beasts, insects, night birds, unnameable sounds that chittered and rasped and howled and shrieked—even as his men had shrieked—and the scent-sounds of moist meat

being ripped from the carcass of an ambushed soft creature was predominant. It was a living jungle, a presence in itself.

He pulled his sword, and struck off across the strand of white shadowed sand toward the rim edge of the tangle. In there somewhere, waited the girl, and the mist-devil, and the promise of life forever, here in this best of all possible worlds, his own Heaven, which he had made from a lifetime of dreams . . .

Yet the dream seemed relentlessly nightmarish, for the jungle resisted him, clawed at him, tempted yet rebuffed him. Griffin found himself hacking at the thick-fleshed twined and interwoven wall of foliage with growing ferocity. His even white teeth, beautifully matched and level, locked in a solid enamel band, and his eyes narrowed with frenzy. The hours melted into a shapeless colloid, and he could not tell whether he was making his way through the dense greenmass, or standing still while the jungle crawled imperceptibly toward him, filling in behind the clots he was hacking away. And darkness, suffocating, in the jungle.

Abruptly, he lunged forward against a singularly rugged matting of interlocked tree branches and hurled himself through the break, as it fell away, unresisting. He was in the clear. At the top of a rise that sloped away below him in softly-curved smoothness, toward a rushing stream of gently-whispering white water. Around small stones it raced, gathering speed, a gentle moist animal streaking toward a far land.

Griffin found himself loping down the hill, toward the bank of the stream, and as he ran, his body grew more and more his own. The hill grew up behind him, and the stream came toward him with gentleness, and he was there: time was another thing here, not forced, not necessary, a pastel passage, without hard edges.

He followed the stream, skirting banks of thickets and trees that seemed to be windswept in their topmost branches, and the stream became a river, and the river rushed to rapids, and then suddenly there were falls. Not great thundering falls down which men might be swept in fragile canoes, but murmuring ledges and sweeps down which the white water surged sweetly, carrying tinges of color from the banks, carrying vagrant leaves and blades of grass, gently, tenderly, comfortingly. Griffin stood silently, watching the waterfall, sensing more than he saw, understanding more than even his senses

could tell him. This was, indeed, the Heaven of his dreams, a place to spend the rest of forever, with the wind and the water and the world another place, another level of sensing, another bad dream had many long times before. This was reality, an only reality for a man whose existence had been not quite bad, merely insufficient; tenable, but hardly enriching. For a man who had lived a life of not quite enough, this was all that there ever could be of goodness and brilliance and light. Griffin moved toward the falls.

The darkness grew darker.

Glowing in the dimensionless whispering dimness, Griffin saw a scene that could only have come from his dreams. The girl, naked white against the ledges and slopes of the falls, water cascading down her back, across her thighs, cool against her belly, her head laid back and white water bubbling through the shining black veil of her hair, touching each strand, silkily shining it with moisture; her eyes closed in simple pleasure; that face, the *right* face, the special face, the certain face of the woman he had always looked for without looking, hunted silently for, without acknowledging the search; lusted for, without feeling worthy of the hunger.

It was the woman his finest instincts had needed to make them valid; the woman who not only gave to him, but to whom he could give; the woman of memory, of desire, of youth, of restlessness, of completion. A dream. And here, against the softspeaking bubbling water, a reality. Glowing magically in the night, the girl raised a hand languidly and with joy, simple unspoken joy, and Griffin started toward her as

the mist-devil materialized. Out of the foam spray, out of the night, out of the suddenly rising chill fog and vapor and cloud-slime, out of starshine and evil mists without proper names, the devil that guarded this woman of visions, materialized. Giant, gigantic, massive, rising higher and higher, larger, more intensely defined against nightness, the devil spread across the sky in a towering, smooth-edged reality.

Great sad eyes, the white molten centers of rat holes in which whirlwinds lived. A brow: massive leaded furrows drawing down in unctuous pleasure at sight of the girl, creature this horrendous, creature this gigantic, liaison with white flesh? The thought skittered like a poisoned rodent across the floor of Griffin's mind, like a small creature with one leg torn off, pain and blood-red ganglia of

conception, then lost itself in the bittersweet crypt beneath thoughts: too repugnant, too monstrous for continued examination. And the mist-devil rose and rose and expanded, and bellows-blew its chest to horizon-filling proportions. Griffin fell back into shadows lest he be seen.

More, greater, still more massive it rose, filling the night sky till it obscured the moon, till nightbirds lived in its face, till molten tremblings—the very stars—served it as exhalations of breath. The mouth of a maniac millions magnified, was its mouth. Terror and fear and whimperings from far underground were the lines of character in a face incalculably old, ancient, decayed with a time that could not be called time by men. And it was one with this woman. It consorted, filthy liaison, subliminal haunted pleiocene gonadal urgings, it and woman, force incarnate and gentle labial moistures. This: the terrible end-hunger of a million billion eons of forced abstinence.

The forever paramour, the eternity lecher, the consumed-by-desire that rose and rose and blotted the world with its bulk. The mist-devil Warren Glazer Griffin had to kill, before he could live forever in his dreams.

Griffin stood back in shadows, trembling within the golden body he wore. Now, abruptly, he was two men once again. The god with his sword, the mortal with his fear. And he swore to himself that he could not do it, could not—even crying inside that poor glorious shell—and could not, and was terribly afraid. But then, as he watched, the mist-devil seemed to implode, drew in upon himself, shrinking shrinking shrinking down and down and down into a smaller tighter neater less infinitely tinier replica of himself, like a gas-filled balloon suddenly released from the hand of a child, whipping, snapping, spinning through the air growing smaller as it lost its muscled tautness . . .

And the mist-devil became the size of a man.

And it went to the woman.

And they made love.

Griffin watched in disgust and loathing as the creature that was age, that was night, that was fear, that was everything save the word *human*, placed hands on white breasts, placed lips on pliant red mouth, placed thighs around belly, and the woman's arms came up, and embraced the creature of always, and they locked in twisting

union, there in the white bubbling water, with the stars shrieking overhead and the moon a bloating madness careening down a sinkhole of space, as Warren Glazer Griffin watched the woman of all his thoughts take in the manhood of something anything but man. And silently, like a footpad, Griffin crept up behind the devil of mist, locked in trembling consumation of desire, and linking his wet and sticky hands about the hilt of the weapon, he raised it up over his head, spread-legged like an executioner, and drove the blade viciously, but at an angle, downdowndown and with the thickrasping crunch of metal through meat, into and out the other side of the neck of the creature.

It drew in a hideous world-load of air, gasping it up and into torn flesh, a rattling distended neck-straining blowfish mass of air, that ended with a sound so high and pathetic that skin prickled up and down Griffin's cheeks, his neck, his back, and the monstrous creature reached off to nowhere to pull out the insane iron that had destroyed him, and the hand went to another location, and the blade was ripped free by Griffin, as the devil rose off the woman, dripping blood and dripping the fluid of love and dripping life away in every instant, careening into the falls with deadfish stains of all-colored blood in the wake, and turned once, to stare full into Griffin's face with a look that denounced him:

From behind!

From behind!

Was gone. Was dead. Was floated down waterfalls to deep stygian pools of refuse and rubble and rust. To silt bottoms where nothing mattered, but gone.

Leaving Warren Glazer Griffin to stand with blood that had spurted up across his wide golden chest, staring down at the woman of his dreams, whose eyes were cataracted with frenzy and fear. All the dream orgies of his life, all the wild couplings of his adolescent nightmares, all the wants and hungers and needs of his woman sensings, were here.

The girl gave only one shrill howl before he took her. He had thoughts all during the frantic struggle and just at the penetration: womanwhore slutlover trollopmine over and over and over and over and

when he rose from her, the eyes that stared back at him, like leaves

in snow, on the first day of winter. Empty winds howled down out of the tundras of his soul. This was the charnel house of his finest fantasies. The burial ground of his forever. The garbage dump, the slain meat, the putrefying reality of his dreams and his Heaven.

Griffin stumbled away from her, hearing the shrieks of men needlessly drowned by his vanity, hearing the voiceless accusation of the devil proclaiming cowardice, hearing the orgasm-condemnation of lust that was never love, of brute desire that was never affection, and realizing at last that these were the real substances of his nature, the true faces of his sins, the marks in the ledger of a life he had never led, yet had worshipped silently at an altar of evil.

All these thoughts, as the guardian of Heaven, the keeper at the gate, the claimer of souls, the weigher of balances, advanced on him through the night.

Griffin looked up and had but a moment to realize he had not succeeded in winning his Heaven . . . as the seventy-eight-foot creature he could have called nothing less than a dragon opened its mouth that was all the world and judgment, and ground him to senseless pulp between rows of triple-fanged teeth.

When they dug the body out of the alley, it made even the hardened construction workers and emergency squad cops ill. Not one bone was left unbroken. The very flesh seemed to have been masticated as if by a nation of cannibal dogs. Even so, the three innured excavators who finally used winding sheets and shovels to bring the shapeless mass up from its eleven foot grave, agreed that it was incredible, totally passed belief, that the head and face were untouched.

And they all agreed that the expression *on* the face was not one of happiness. There were many possible explanations for that expression, but none of them would have said terror, for it was not terror. They would not have said helplessness, for it was not that, either. They might have settled on a pathetic sense of loss, had their sensibilities run that deep, but none of them would have felt that the expression said, with great finality: a man may truly live in his dreams, his noblest dreams, but only, *only* if he is worthy of those dreams.

It did not rain that night, anywhere in the known universe.

This is the end of the book. One of my favorite stories. Also, the last introduction. Peculiar thing about these introductions: they began as simply random notes on theme in my first collection. Then, as the years have passed, they have become more and more important, more integrated with what I've been trying to say in my fiction. The response to them is mixed. There are reviewers and critics and fans who think the stories should be thrown out, and the introductions kept; perhaps an entire book of bibble-bibble-bibble. There is another faction that hates me so much personally, they cannot stand the intrusion of my personality. The stories they don't seem to mind much (though they contend I'm a poor lousy hack with a tiny gift for explosiveness). But the intros drive them cockeyed. They pray that either I stop writing prefaces, or lightning strikes me in the spleen. There are some who enjoy the totality, who think they get more for their money and their enjoyment with this additional material specially-written for a book. And there are the vast multitudes who think the entire item ought to be burned as it comes off the presses. There are even a couple of people in Pocatello who've never heard of me, but mostly, they just stand around looking at the sky hoping to see another of them great silver birds go fly-fly to the sunset. Suffice it to say, I enjoy *writing these little writer-to-reader liaisons, so get used to it, troops. Relief is nowhere in sight. But sometimes the background of a story is almost more interesting than the yarn I made from it. Take this story, for instance. Maggie lives! She is a tall blonde in Los Angeles. I never quite got her into bed, though it was close. I had dated her sporadically, for a year or so, back in 1963, and then lost track of her. Then, when Joseph E. Levine flew the cast and production people of "The Oscar" to Las Vegas for Tony Bennett's opening at The Riviera, in conjunction with the film in which Tony was appearing, I met her again. It was very late. Everybody else had either gone to bed, or picked up some action, or were gambling. I was sitting alone at the blackjack table, in my tuxedo, when a hand was laid on my shoulder. I turned around and it was —whooops. I almost called her by her real name. It was Maggie. She was in the chorus line at one of the hotels, and I suspect she was hooking on the side. We*

talked and she invited me home with her. But it stirred up all sorts of remembrances of the chick, and most particularly the bedroom and bathroom of her apartment in Los Angeles. Strange that I would think of that, at that moment, but I remembered vividly walking into the bedroom the first time I came to pick her up. Everything was plush red velvet, like a New Orleans whorehouse. The bathroom fixtures were gold dolphins spewing out water. There was a frantic need to be elegant for this girl. She had come from simple beginnings, and "class" was her goal in this life. Somehow, seeing her again in Vegas, she fitted the town more precisely than anyone else I'd ever met. I hate Vegas. It represents a physical manifestation of evil in this country, for my money. (None of which I lose at the tables, incidentally; I'm phenomenally lucky.) But she fit. Not that she was evil, just that she was right for the town . . . a product of the times. So I suddenly had the alarming experience of my intellect getting the better of my gonads, and I turned down her offer of bed-service, because all at once, in a total presence of structure, the story that follows popped into my head. I bid her a suave adieu and dashed up to my room in The Riviera. I had my typewriter with me. I always have my typewriter *with me. I stripped down naked (which is the way I write frequently) and started writing the story. Between getting dressed and dashing downstairs to bug the casino manager for facts and specifics on slot machines (and incidentally,* everything *in this story is accurate), and sitting directly in the line of the air conditioning, by morning the story was half-finished and I had pleurisy. I went into a coma later that day, and they had to fly my unconscious carcass back to LA, where I went into a hospital. When I got out, I finished the yarn. I have seen "Maggie" several times since, but by now she is so firmly entrenched in my thinking as the character of the story, that I could no more bring myself to lay her than I could to re-visit Vegas. Both are deadly, and the further away from each of them I stay, the better. A note on style, before I go. I've tried in this story to give a sense of the immediacy, the whambangthankyoumaam of Vegas. The style I've employed is pure concussion. But I scream helplessly at the inadequacies of the lineal medium. There is a section herein, in which I try to convey a sense of impression of the moment of death. In films I could use effects. In type-on-paper it comes down to the enormously ineffectual italics, type tricks, staccato sentences and spacings of a man groping to*

expand his medium. Bear with me. It is experimentation, and unless typesetters and editors somehow develop the miracle talent of letting writers tear the form apart, to reassemble it in their individual ways, the best I'll be able to do in terms of freedom of impact is what I got away with here in

Pretty Maggie Moneyeyes

WITH AN EIGHT HOLE-CARD and a queen showing, with the dealer showing a four up, Kostner decided to let the house do the work. So he stood, and the dealer turned up. Six.

The dealer looked like something out of a 1935 George Raft film: Arctic diamond-chip eyes, manicured fingers long as a brain surgeon's, straight black hair slicked flat away from the pale forehead. He did not look up as he peeled them off. A three. Another three. Bam. A five. Bam. Twenty-one, and Kostner saw his last thirty dollars—six five-dollar chips—scraped on the edge of the cards, into the dealer's chip racks. Busted. Flat. Down and out in Las Vegas, Nevada. Playground of the Western World.

He slid off the comfortable stool-chair and turned his back on the blackjack table. The action was already starting again, like waves closing over a drowned man. He had been there, was gone, and no one had noticed. No one had seen a man blow the last tie with salvation. Kostner now had his choice: he could bum his way into Los Angeles and try to find something that resembled a new life . . . or he could go blow his brains out through the back of his head.

Neither choice showed much light or sense.

He thrust his hands deep into the pockets of his worn and dirty chinos, and started away down the line of slot machines clanging and rattling on the other side of the aisle between blackjack tables.

He stopped. He felt something in his pocket. Beside him, but all-engrossed, a fiftyish matron in electric lavender capris, high heels and Ship n' Shore blouse was working two slots, loading and pulling

one while waiting for the other to clock down. She was dumping quarters in a seemingly inexhaustible supply from a Dixie cup held in her left hand. There was a surrealistic presence to the woman. She was almost automated, not a flicker of expression on her face, the eyes fixed and unwavering. Only when the gong rang, someone down the line had pulled a jackpot, did she look up. And at that moment Kostner knew what was wrong and immoral and deadly about Vegas, about legalized gambling, about setting the traps all baited and open in front of the average human. The woman's face was gray with hatred, envy, lust and dedication to the game—in that timeless instant when she heard another drugged soul down the line winning a minuscule jackpot. A jackpot that would only lull the player with words like *luck* and *ahead of the game.* The jackpot lure; the sparkling, bobbling many-colored wiggler in a sea of poor fish.

The thing in Kostner's pocket was a silver dollar.

He brought it out and looked at it.

The eagle was hysterical.

But Kostner pulled to an abrupt halt, only one half-footstep from the sign indicating the limits of Tap City. He was still with it. What the high-rollers called the edge, the *vigerish,* the fine hole-card. One buck. One cartwheel. Pulled out of the pocket not half as deep as the pit into which Kostner had just been about to plunge.

What the hell, he thought, and turned to the row of slot machines.

He had thought they'd all been pulled out of service, the silver dollar slots. A shortage of coinage, said the United States Mint. But right there, side by side with the nickel and quarter bandits, was one cartwheel machine. Two thousand dollar jackpot. Kostner grinned foolishly. If you're gonna go out, go out like a champ.

He thumbed the silver dollar into the coin slot and grabbed the heavy, oiled handle. Shining cast aluminum and pressed steel. Big black plastic ball, angled for arm-ease, pull it all day and you won't get weary.

Without a prayer in the universe, Kostner pulled the handle.

She had been born in Tucson, mother full-blooded Cherokee, father a bindlestiff on his way through. Mother had been working a truckers' stop, father had popped for spencer steak and sides. Mother had just gotten over a bad scene, indeterminate origins, unsatisfac-

tory culminations. Mother had popped for bed. And sides. Margaret Annie Jessie had come nine months later; black of hair, fair of face, and born into a life of poverty. Twenty-three years later, a determined product of Miss Clairol and Berlitz, a dream-image formed by Vogue *and intimate association with the rat race, Margaret Annie Jessie had become a contraction.*

Maggie.

Long legs, trim and coltish; hips a trifle large, the kind that promote that *specific thought in men, about getting their hands around it; belly flat, isometrics; waist cut to the bone, a waist that works in any style from dirndl to disco-slacks; no breasts—all nipple, but no breast, like an expensive whore (the way O'Hara pinned it)—and no padding . . . forget the cans, baby, there's other, more important action; smooth, Michelangelo-sculpted neck, a pillar, proud; and all that face.*

Outthrust chin, perhaps a tot too much belligerence, but if you'd walloped as many gropers, you too, sweetheart; narrow mouth, petulant lower lip, nice to chew on, a lower lip as though filled with honey, bursting, ready for things to happen; a nose that threw the right sort of shadow, flaring nostrils, the acceptable words—aquiline, patrician, classic, allathat; cheekbones as stark and promontory as a spit of land after ten years of open ocean; cheekbones holding darkness like narrow shadows, sooty beneath the taut-fleshed bone-structure; amazing cheekbones, the whole face, really; simple uptilted eyes, the touch of the Cherokee, eyes that looked out at you, as you looked in at them, like someone peering out of the keyhole as you peered in; actually, dirty eyes, they said you can get it.

Blonde hair, a great deal of it, wound and rolled and smoothed and flowing, in the old style, the pageboy thing men always admire; no tight little cap of slicked plastic; no ratted and teased Anapurna of bizarre coiffure; no ironed-flat discothèque hair like number 3 flat noodles. Hair, the way a man wants it, so he can dig his hands in at the base of the neck and pull all that face very close.

An operable woman, a working mechanism, a rigged and sudden machinery of softness and motivation.

Twenty-three, and determined as hell never to abide in that vale of poverty her mother had called purgatory for her entire life; snuffed out in a grease fire in the last trailer, somewhere in Arizona, thank

God no more pleas for a little money from babygirl Maggie hustling drinks in a Los Angeles topless joint. (There ought to be some *remorse in there somewhere, for a Mommy gone where all the good grease-fire victims go. Look around, you'll find it.)*

Maggie.

Genetic freak. Mommy's Cherokee uptilted eye-shape, and Polack quickscrewing Daddy WithoutaName's blue as innocence color.

Blue-eyed Maggie, dyed blonde, alla that face, alla that leg, fifty bucks a night can get it and it sounds *like it's having a climax.*

Irish-innocent blue-eyed innocent French-legged innocent Maggie. Polack. Cherokee. Irish. All-woman and going on the market for this month's rent on the stucco pad, eighty bucks' worth of groceries, a couple month's worth for a Mustang, three appointments with the specialist in Beverly Hills about that shortness of breath after a night on the hustle bump the sticky thigh the disco lurch the gotcha sweat: woman minutes. Increments under the meat; perspiration purchases, yeah it does.

Maggie, Maggie, Maggie, pretty Maggie Moneyeyes, who came from Tucson and trailers and rheumatic fever and a surge to live that was all kaleidoscope frenzy of clawing scrabbling no-nonsense. If it took laying on one's back and making sounds like a panther in the desert, then one did it, because nothing, but nothing *was as bad as being dirt-poor, itchy-skinned, soiled-underwear, scuff-toed, hairy and ashamed lousy with the no-gots. Nothing!*

Maggie. Hooker. Hustler. Grabber. Swinger. If there's a buck in it, there's rhythm and the onomatopoeia is Maggie Maggie Maggie.

She who puts out. For a price, whatever that might be.

Maggie was dating Nuncio. He was Sicilian. He had dark eyes and an alligator-grain wallet with slip-in pockets for credit cards. He was a spender, a sport, a high-roller. They went to Vegas.

Maggie and the Sicilian. Her blue eyes and his slip-in pockets. But mostly her blue eyes.

The spinning reels behind the three long glass windows blurred, and Kostner knew there wasn't a chance. Two thousand dollar jackpot. Round and round, whirring. Three bells or two bells and a jackpot bar, get 18; three plums or two plums and a jackpot bar, get 14; three oranges or two oranges and a jac—

Ten, five, two bucks for a single cherry cluster in first position. Something . . . I'm drowning . . . something . . .

The whirring . . .

Round and round . . .

As something happened that was not considered in the pit-boss manual.

The reels whipped and snapped to a stop, clank clank clank, tight in place.

Three bars looked up at Kostner. But they did not say JACKPOT. They were three bars on which stared three blue eyes. Very blue, very immediate, very JACKPOT!!

Twenty silver dollars clattered into the payoff trough at the bottom of the machine. An orange light popped on in the Casino Cashier's cage, bright orange on the jackpot board. And the gong began clanging overhead.

The Slot Machine Floor Manager nodded once to the Pit Boss, who pursed his lips and started toward the seedy-looking man still standing with his hand on the slot's handle.

The token payment—twenty silver dollars—lay untouched in the payoff trough. The balance of the jackpot—one thousand nine hundred and eighty dollars—would be paid manually by the Casino Cashier. And Kostner stood, dumbly, as the three blue eyes stared up at him.

There was a moment of idiotic disorientation, as Kostner stared back at the three blue eyes; a moment in which the slot machine's mechanisms registered to themselves; and the gong was clanging furiously.

All through the hotel's Casino people turned from their games to stare. At the roulette tables the white-on-white players from Detroit and Cleveland pulled their watery eyes away from the clattering ball and stared down the line for a second, at the ratty-looking guy in front of the slot machine. From where they sat, they could not tell it was a two grand pot, and their rheumy eyes went back into billows of cigar smoke, and that little ball.

The blackjack hustlers turned momentarily, screwing around in their seats, and smiled. They were closer to the slot-players in temperament, but they knew the slots were a dodge to keep the old

ladies busy, while the players worked toward their endless twenty-ones.

And the old dealer, who could no longer cut it at the fast-action boards, who had been put out to pasture by a grateful management, standing at the Wheel of Fortune near the entrance to the Casino, even he paused in his zombie-murmuring ("Annnnother winner onna Wheel of Forchun!") to no one at all, and looked toward Kostner and that incredible gong-clanging. Then, in a moment, still with no players, he called *another* nonexistent winner.

Kostner heard the gong from far away. It had to mean he had won two thousand dollars, but that was impossible. He checked the payoff chart on the face of the machine. Three bars labeled JACKPOT meant JACKPOT. Two thousand dollars.

But these three bars did not say JACKPOT. They were three gray bars, rectangular in shape, with a blue eye directly in the center of each bar.

Blue eyes?

Somewhere, a connection was made, and electricity, a billion volts of electricity, were shot through Kostner. His hair stood on end, his fingertips bled raw, his eyes turned to jelly, and every fiber in his musculature became radioactive. Somewhere, out there, in a place that was not this *place, Kostner had been inextricably bound to—to someone.* Blue eyes?

The gong had faded out of his head, the constant noise level of the Casino, chips chittering, people mumbling, dealers calling plays, it had all gone, and he was embedded in silence.

Tied to that someone else, out there somewhere, through those three blue eyes.

Then in an instant, it had passed, and he was alone again, as though released by a giant hand, the breath crushed out of him. He staggered up against the slot machine.

"You all right, fellah?"

A hand gripped him by the arm, steadied him. The gong was still clanging overhead somewhere, and he was breathless from a journey he had just taken. His eyes focused and he found himself looking at

the stocky Pit Boss who had been on duty while he had been playing blackjack.

"Yeah . . . I'm okay, just a little dizzy is all."

"Sounds like you got yourself a big jackpot, fellah," the Pit Boss grinned. It was a leathery grin; something composed of stretched muscles and conditioned reflexes, totally mirthless.

"Yeah . . . great . . ." Kostner tried to grin back. But he was still shaking from that electrical absorption that had kidnaped him.

"Let me check it out," the Pit Boss was saying, edging around Kostner, and staring at the face of the slot machine. "Yeah, three jackpot bars, all right. You're a winner."

Then it dawned on Kostner! Two thousand dollars! He looked down at the slot machine and saw—

Three bars with the word JACKPOT on them. No blue eyes, just words that meant money. Kostner looked around frantically, was he losing his mind? *From somewhere, not in the Casino room, he heard a tinkle of rhodium-plated laughter.*

He scooped up the twenty silver dollars. The Pit Boss dropped another cartwheel into the Chief, and pulled the jackpot off. Then the Pit Boss walked him to the rear of the Casino, talking to him in a muted, extremely polite tone of voice. At the Cashier's window, the Pit Boss nodded to a weary-looking man at a huge Rolodex card-file, checking credit ratings.

"Barney, jackpot on the cartwheel Chief; slot five-oh-oh-one-five." He grinned at Kostner, who tried to smile back. It was difficult. He felt stunned.

The Cashier checked a payoff book for the correct amount to be drawn and leaned over the counter toward Kostner. "Check or cash, sir?"

Kostner felt buoyancy coming back to him. "Is the Casino's check good?" They all three laughed at that. "A check's fine," Kostner said. The check was drawn, and the Check-Riter punched out the little bumps that said two thousand. "The twenty cartwheels are a gift," the Cashier said, sliding the check through to Kostner.

He held it, looked at it, and still found it difficult to believe. Two grand, back on the golden road.

As he walked back through the Casino with the Pit Boss, the stocky

man asked pleasantly, "Well, what are you going to do with it?" Kostner had to think a moment. He didn't really have any plans. But then the sudden realization came to him: "I'm going to play that slot machine again." The Pit Boss smiled: a congenital sucker. He would put all twenty of those silver dollars back into the Chief, and then turn to the other games. Blackjack, roulette, faro, baccarat . . . in a few hours he would have redeposited the two grand with the hotel Casino. It always happened.

He walked Kostner back to the slot machine, and patted him on the shoulder. "Lotsa luck, fellah."

As he turned away, Kostner slipped a silver dollar into the machine, and pulled the handle.

The Pit Boss had only taken five steps when he heard the incredible sound of the reels clicking to a stop, the clash of twenty token silver dollars hitting the payoff trough, and that goddammed gong went out of its mind again.

She had known that sonofabitch Nuncio was a perverted swine. A walking filth. A dungheap between his ears. Some kind of monster in nylon undershorts. There weren't many kinds of games Maggie hadn't played, but what that Sicilian De Sade wanted to do was outright vomity!

She nearly fainted when he suggested it. Her heart—which the Beverly Hills specialist had said she should not tax—began whumping frantically. "You pig!" she screamed. "You filthy dirty ugly pig you, Nuncio you pig!" She had bounded out of the bed and started to throw on clothes. She didn't even bother with a brassiere, pulling the poorboy sweater on over her thin breasts, still crimson with the touches and love-bites Nuncio had showered on them.

He sat up in the bed, a pathetic-looking little man, gray hair at the temples and no hair atall on top, and his eyes were moist. He was porcine, was indeed the swine she called him, but he was helpless before her. He was in love with his hooker, with the tart whom he was supporting. It had been the first time for the swine Nuncio, and he was helpless. Back in Detroit, had it been a floozy, a chippy broad, he would have gotten out of the double bed and rapped her around pretty good. But this Maggie, she tied him in knots. He had suggested

. . . that, *what they should do together . . . because he was so consumed with her. But* she *was furious with* him. *It wasn't* that *bizarre an idea!*

"Gimme a chanct'a talk t'ya, honey . . . Maggie . . ."

"You filthy pig, Nuncio! Give me some money, I'm going down to the Casino, and I don't want to see your filthy pig face for the rest of the day, remember that!"

And she had gone in his wallet and pants, and taken eight hundred and sixteen dollars, while he watched. He was helpless before her. She was something stolen from a world he knew only as "class" and she could do what she wanted with him.

Genetic freak Maggie, blue-eyed posing mannequin Maggie, pretty Maggie Moneyeyes, who was one-half Cherokee and one-half a buncha other things, had absorbed her lessons well. She was the very model of a "class broad."

"Not for the rest of the day, do you understand?" she snapped at him, and went downstairs, furious, to fret and gamble and wonder about nothing but years of herself.

Men stared after her as she walked. She carried herself like a challenge, the way a squire carried a pennant, the way a prize bitch carried herself in the judge's ring. Born to the blue. The wonders of mimicry and desire.

Maggie had no lust for gambling, none whatever. She merely wanted to taste the fury of her relationship with the swine Sicilian, her need for solidarity in a life built on the edge of the slide area, the senselessness of being here in Las Vegas when she could be back in Beverly Hills. She grew angrier and more ill at the thought of Nuncio upstairs in the room, taking another shower. She bathed three times a day. But it was different with him. He knew she resented his smell; he had the soft odor of wet fur sometimes, and she had told him about it. Now he bathed constantly, and hated it. He was a foreigner to the bath. His life had been marked by various kinds of filths, and baths for him now were more of an obscenity than dirt could ever have been. For her, bathing was different. It was a necessity. She had to keep the patina of the world off her, had to remain clean and smooth and white. A presentation, not an object of flesh and hair. A chromium instrument, something never pitted by rust and corrosion.

When she was touched by them, by any one of them, by the men, by

all the Nuncios, they left little pitholes of bloody rust on her white, permanent flesh; cobwebs, sooty stains. She had *to bathe. Often.*

She strolled down between the tables and the slots, carrying eight hundred and sixteen dollars. Eight one hundred dollar bills and sixteen dollars in ones.

At the change booth she got cartwheels for the sixteen ones. The Chief waited. It was her baby. She played it to infuriate the Sicilian. He had told her to play the nickel slots, the quarter or dime slots, but she always infuriated him by blowing fifty or a hundred dollars in ten minutes, one coin after another, in the big Chief.

She faced the machine squarely, and put in the first silver dollar. She pulled the handle that swine Nuncio. Another dollar, pulled the handle how long does this go on? The reels cycled and spun and whirled and whipped in a blurringspinning metalhumming overand-overandover as Maggie blue-eyed Maggie hated and hated and thought of hate and all the days and nights of swine behind her and ahead of her and if only she had all the money in this room in this Casino in this hotel in this town right now this very instant just an instant thisinstant it would be enough to whirring and humming and spinning and overandoverandoverandover and she would be free free free and all the world would never touch her body again the swine would never touch her white flesh again and then suddenly as dollarafterdollarafterdollar went aroundaroundaround hummmmming in reels of cherries and bells and bars and plums and oranges there was suddenly painpainpain a SHARP pain!pain!pain! in her chest, her heart, her center, a needle, a lancet, a burning, a pillar of flame that was purest pure purer PAIN!

Maggie, pretty Maggie Moneyeyes, who wanted all that money in that cartwheel Chief slot machine, Maggie who had come from filth and rheumatic fever, who had come all the way to three baths a day and a specialist in Very Expensive Beverly Hills, that *Maggie suddenly had a seizure, a flutter, a slam of a coronary thrombosis and fell instantly dead on the floor of the Casino. Dead.*

One instant she had been holding the handle of the slot machine, willing her entire being, all that hatred for all the swine she had ever rolled with, willing every fiber of every cell of every chromosome into that machine, wanting to suck out every silver vapor within its belly, and the next *instant—so close they might have been the same—her*

heart exploded and killed her and she slipped to the floor . . . still touching the Chief.

On the floor.
Dead.
Struck dead.
Liar. All the lies that were her life.
Dead on a floor.

[A moment out of time ■ lights whirling and spinning in a cotton candy universe ■ down a bottomless funnel roundly sectioned like a goat's horn ■ a cornucopia that rose up cuculiform smooth and slick as a worm belly ■ endless nights that pealed ebony funeral bells ■ out of fog ■ out of weightlessness ■ suddenly total cellular knowledge ■ memory running backward ■ gibbering spastic blindness ■ a soundless owl of frenzy trapped in a cave of prisms ■ sand endlessly draining down ■ billows of forever ■ edges of the world as they splintered ■ foam rising drowning from inside ■ the smell of rust ■ rough green corners that burn ■ memory the gibbering spastic blind memory ■ seven rushing vacuums of nothing ■ yellow ■ pinpoints cast in amber straining and elongating running like live wax ■ chill fevers ■ overhead the odor of stop ■ this is the stopover before hell or heaven ■ this is limbo ■ trapped and doomed alone in a mist-eaten nowhere ■ a soundless screaming a soundless whirring a soundless spinning spinning spinning ● spinning ● spinning ● spinningggggggggggggg]

Maggie had wanted all the silver in the machine. She had died, willing herself into the machine. Now looking out from within, from inside the limbo that had become her own purgatory, Maggie was trapped, in the oiled and anodized interior of the silver dollar slot machine. The prison of her final desires, where she had wanted to be, completely trapped in that last instant of life between life/death. Maggie, all soul now, trapped for all eternity in the cage soul of the soulless machine. Limbo. Trapped.

"I hope you don't mind if I call over one of the slot men," the Slot Machine Floor Manager was saying, from a far distance. He was in his late fifties, a velvet-voiced man whose eyes held nothing of light and

certainly nothing of kindness. He had stopped the Pit Boss as the stocky man had turned in mid-step to return to Kostner and the jackpotted machine; he had taken the walk himself. "We have to make sure, you know how it is, somebody didn't fool the slot, you know, maybe it's outta whack or something, you know."

He lifted his left hand and there was a clicker in it, the kind children use at Halloween. He clicked half a dozen times, like a rabid cricket, and there was a scurrying in the pit between the tables.

Kostner was only faintly aware of what was happening. Instead of being totally awake, feeling the surge of adrenaline through his veins, the feeling any gambler gets when he is ahead of the game, a kind of desperate urgency when he has hit it for a boodle, he was numb, partaking of the action around him only as much as a drinking glass involves itself in the alcoholic's drunken binge.

All color and sound had been leached out of him.

A tired-looking, resigned-weary man wearing a gray porter's jacket, as gray as his hair, as gray as his indoor skin, came to them, carrying a leather wrap-up of tools. The slot repairman studied the machine, turning the pressed steel body around on its stand, studying the back. He used a key on the back door and for an instant Kostner had a view of gears, springs, armatures and the clock that ran the slot mechanism. The repairman nodded silently over it, closed and relocked it, turned it around again and studied the face of the machine.

"Nobody's been spooning it," he said, and went away.

Kostner stared at the Floor Manager.

"Gaffing. That's what he meant. Spooning's another word for it. Some guys use a little piece of plastic, or a wire, shove it down through the escalator, it kicks the machine. Nobody thought that's what happened here, but you know, we have to make sure, two grand is a big payoff, and twice . . . well, you know, I'm sure you'll understand. If a guy was doing it with a boomerang—"

Kostner raised an eyebrow.

"—uh, yeah, a boomerang, it's another way to spoon the machine. But we just wanted to make a little check, and now everybody's satisfied, so if you'll just come back to the Casino Cashier with me—"

And they paid him off again.

So he went back to the slot machine, and stood before it for a long

time, staring at it. The change girls and the dealers going off-duty; the little old ladies with their canvas work gloves worn to avoid calluses when pulling the slot handles, the men's room attendant on his way up front to get more matchbooks, the floral tourists, the idle observers, the hard drinkers, the sweepers, the busboys, the gamblers with poached-egg eyes who had been up all night, the showgirls with massive breasts and diminutive sugar daddies, all of them conjectured mentally about the beat-up walker who was staring at the silver dollar Chief. He did not move, merely stared at the machine . . . and they wondered.

The machine was staring back at Kostner.

Three blue eyes.

The electric current had sparked through him again, as the machine had clocked down and the eyes turned up a second time, as he had *won* a second time. But this time he knew there was something more than luck involved, for no one else had seen those three blue eyes.

So now he stood before the machine, waiting. It spoke to him. Inside his skull, where no one had ever lived but himself, now someone else moved and spoke to him. A girl. A beautiful girl. Her name was Maggie, and she spoke to him.

I've been waiting for you. A long time, I've been waiting for you, Kostner. Why do you think you hit the jackpot? Because I've been waiting for you, and I want you. You'll win all the jackpots. Because I want you, I need you. Love me, I'm Maggie, I'm so alone, love me.

Kostner had been staring at the slot machine for a very long time, and his weary brown eyes had seemed to be locked to the blue eyes on the jackpot bars. But he knew no one else could see the blue eyes, and no one else could hear the voice, and no one else kew about Maggie.

He was the universe to her. Everything to her.

He thumbed in another silver dollar, and the Pit Boss watched, the slot machine repairman watched, the Slot Machine Floor Manager watched, three change girls watched, and a pack of unidentified players watched, some from their seats.

The reels whirled, the handle snapped back, and in a second they flipped down to a halt, twenty silver dollars tokened themselves into

the payoff trough and a woman at one of the crap tables belched a fragment of hysterical laughter.

And the gong went insane again.

The Floor Manager came over and said, very softly, "Mr. Kostner, it'll take us about fifteen minutes to pull this machine and check it out. I'm sure you understand." As two slot repairmen came out of the back, hauled the Chief off its stand, and took it into the repair room at the rear of the Casino.

While they waited, the Floor Manager regaled Kostner with stories of spooners who had used intricate magnets inside their clothes, of boomerang men who had attached their plastic implements under their sleeves so they could be extended on spring-loaded clips, of cheaters who had come equipped with tiny electric drills in their hands and wires that slipped into the tiny drilled holes. And he kept saying he knew Kostner would understand.

But Kostner knew the Floor Manager would not understand.

When they brought the Chief back, the repairmen nodded assuredly. "Nothing wrong with it. Works perfectly. Nobody's been boomin' it."

But the blue eyes were gone on the jackpot bars.

Kostner knew they would return.

They paid him off again.

He returned and played again. And again. And again. They put a "spotter" on him. He won again. And again. And again. The crowd had grown to massive proportions. Word had spread like the silent communications of the telegraph vine, up and down the Strip, all the way to downtown Vegas and the sidewalk casinos where they played night and day every day of the year, and the crowd moved toward the hotel, and the Casino, and the seedy-looking walker with his weary brown eyes. The crowd moved to him inexorably, drawn like lemmings by the odor of the luck that rose from him like musky electrical cracklings. And he won. Again and again. Thirty-eight thousand dollars. And the three blue eyes continued to stare up at him. Her lover was winning. Maggie and her Moneyeyes.

Finally, the Casino decided to speak to Kostner. They pulled the Chief for fifteen minutes, for a supplemental check by experts from the slot machine company in downtown Vegas, and while they were

checking it, they asked Kostner to come to the main office of the hotel.

The owner was there. His face seemed faintly familiar to Kostner. Had he seen it on television? The newspapers?

"Mr. Kostner, my name is Jules Hartshorn."

"I'm pleased to meet you."

"Quite a string of luck you're having out there."

"It's been a long time coming."

"You realize, this sort of luck is impossible."

"I'm compelled to believe it, Mr. Hartshorn."

"Um. As am I. It's happening to my Casino. But we're thoroughly convinced of one of two possibilities, Mr. Kostner: one, either the machine is inoperable in a way we can't detect, or two, you are the cleverest spooner we've ever had in here."

"I'm not cheating."

"As you can see, Mr. Kostner, I'm smiling. The reason I'm smiling is at your naiveté in believing I would take your word for it. I'm perfectly happy to nod politely and say of course you aren't cheating. But no one can win thirty-eight thousand dollars on nineteen straight jackpots off one slot machine; it doesn't even have mathematical odds against its happening, Mr. Kostner. It's on a cosmic scale of improbability with three dark planets crashing into our sun within the next twenty minutes. It's on a par with the Pentagon, the Forbidden City and the Kremlin all three pushing the red button at the same microsecond. It's an impossibility, Mr. Kostner. An impossibility that's happening to me."

"I'm sorry."

"Not really."

"No, not really. I can use the money."

"For what, exactly, Mr. Kostner?"

"I hadn't thought about it, really."

"I see. Well, Mr. Kostner, let's look at it this way. I can't stop you from playing, and if you continue to win, I'll be required to pay off. And no stubble-chinned thugs will be waiting in an alley to jackroll you and take the money. The checks will be honored. The best I can hope for, Mr. Kostner, is the attendant publicity. Right now, every player in Vegas is in that Casino, waiting for you to drop cartwheels into that machine. It won't make up for what I'm losing, if you

continue the way you've been, but it will help. Every high-roller in town likes to rub up next to luck. All I ask is that you cooperate a little."

"The least I can do, considering your generosity."

"An attempt at humor."

"I'm sorry. What is it you'd like me to do?"

"Get about ten hours' sleep."

"While you pull the slot and have it worked over thoroughly?"

"Yes."

"If I wanted to keep winning, that might be a pretty stupid move on my part. You might chance the thigamajig inside so I couldn't win if I put back every dollar of that thirty-eight grand."

"We're licensed by the state of Nevada, Mr. Kostner."

"I come from a good family, too, and take a look at me. I'm a bum with thirty-eight thousand dollars in my pocket."

"Nothing will be done to that slot machine, Kostner."

"Then why pull it for ten hours?"

"To work it over thoroughly in the shop. If something as undetectable as metal fatigue or a worn escalator tooth or—we want to make sure this doesn't happen with other machines. And the extra time will get the word around town; we can use the crowd. Some of those tourists will stick to our fingers, and it'll help defray the expense of having you break the bank at this Casino—on a slot machine."

"I have to take your word."

"This hotel will be in business long after you're gone, Kostner."

"Not if I keep winning."

Hartshorn's smile was a stricture. "A good point."

"So it isn't much of an argument."

"It's the only one I have. If you want to get back out on that floor, I can't stop you."

"No Mafia hoods ventilate me later?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said: no Maf—"

"You have a picturesque manner of speaking. In point of fact, I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about."

"I'm sure you haven't."

"You've got to stop reading *The National Enquirer*. This is a legally run business. I'm merely asking a favor."

"Okay, Mr. Hartshorn, I've been three days without any sleep. Ten hours will do me a world of good."

"I'll have the desk clerk find you a quiet room on the top floor. And thank you, Mr. Kostner."

"Think nothing of it."

"I'm afraid that will be impossible."

"A lot of impossible things are happening lately."

He turned to go, as Hartshorn lit a cigarette.

"Oh, by the way, Mr. Kostner?"

Kostner stopped and half-turned. "Yes?"

His eyes were getting difficult to focus. There was a ringing in his ears. Hartshorn seemed to waver at the edge of his vision like heat lightning across a prairie. Like memories of things Kostner had come across the country to forget. Like the whimpering and pleading that kept tugging at the cells of his brain. The voice of Maggie. Still back in there, saying . . . things . . .

They'll try to keep you from me.

All he could think about was the ten hours of sleep he had been promised. Suddenly it was more important than the money, than forgetting, than anything. Hartshorn was talking, was saying things, but Kostner could not hear him. It was as if he had turned off the sound and saw only the silent rubbery movement of Hartshorn's lips. He shook his head trying to clear it.

There were half a dozen Hartshorns all melting into and out of one another. And the voice of Maggie.

I'm warm here, and alone. I could be good to you, if you can come to me. Please come, please hurry.

"Mr. Kostner?"

Hartshorn's voice came draining down through silt as thick as velvet flocking. Kostner tried to focus again. His extremely weary brown eyes began to track.

"Did you know about that slot machine?" Hartshorn was saying. "A peculiar thing happened with it about six weeks ago."

"What was that?"

"A girl died playing it. She had a heart attack, a seizure while she was pulling the handle, and died right out there on the floor."

Kostner was silent for a moment. He wanted desperately to ask

Hartshorn what color the dead girl's eyes had been, but he was afraid the owner would say blue.

He paused with his hand on the office door. "Seems as though you've had nothing but a streak of bad luck on that machine."

Hartshorn smiled an enigmatic smile. "It might not change for a while, either."

Kostner felt his jaw muscles tighten. "Meaning I might die, too, and wouldn't *that* be bad luck."

Hartshorn's smile became hieroglyphic, permanent, stamped on him forever. "Sleep tight, Mr. Kostner."

In a dream, she came to him. Long, smooth thighs and soft golden down on her arms; blue eyes deep as the past, misted with a fine scintillance like lavender spiderwebs; taut body that was the only body Woman had ever had, from the very first. Maggie came to him.

Hello, I've been traveling a long time.

"Who are you?" Kostner asked, wonderingly. He was standing on a chilly plain, or was it a plateau? The wind curled around them both, or was it only around him? She was exquisite, and he saw her clearly, or was it through a mist? Her voice was deep and resonant, or was it light and warm as night-blooming jasmine?

I'm Maggie. I love you. I've waited for you.

"You have blue eyes."

Yes. *With love.*

"You're very beautiful."

Thank you. *With female amusement.*

"But why me? Why let it happen to me? Are you the girl who—are you the one that was sick—the one who—?"

I'm Maggie. And you, I picked you, because you need me. You've needed someone for a long long time.

Then it unrolled for Kostner. The past unrolled and he saw who he was. He saw himself alone. Always alone. As a child, born to kind and warm parents who hadn't the vaguest notion of who he was, what he wanted to be, where his talents lay. So he had run off, when he was in his teens, and alone always alone on the road. For years and months and days and hours, with no one. Casual friendships, based on food, or sex, or artifical similarities. But no one to whom he could cleave,

and cling, and belong. It was that way till Susie, and with her he had found light. He had discovered the scents and aromas of a spring that was eternally one day away. He had laughed, really laughed, and known with her it would at last be all right. So he had poured all of himself into her, giving her everything; all his hopes, his secret thoughts, his tender dreams; and she had taken them, taken him, all of him, and he had known for the first time what it was to have a place to live, to have a home in someone's heart. It was all the silly and gentle things he laughed at in other people, but for him it was breathing deeply of wonder.

He had stayed with her for a long time, and had supported her, supported her son from the first marriage; the marriage Susie never talked about. And the one day, he *had come back, as Susie had always known he would. He was a dark creature of ruthless habits and vicious nature, but she had been his woman, all along, and Kostner realized he had been used as a stop-gap, as a bill-payer till her wandering terror came home to nest. Then she had asked him to leave. Broke, and tapped out in all the silent inner ways a man can be drained, he had left, without even a fight, for all the fight had been leached out of him. He had left, and wandered West, and finally come to Las Vegas, where he had hit bottom. And found Maggie. In a dream, with blue eyes, he had found Maggie.*

I want you to belong to me. I love you. *Her truth was vibrant in Kostner's mind. She was his, at last someone who was special, was his.*

"Can I trust you? I've never been able to trust anyone before. Women, never. But I need someone. I really need someone."

It's me, always. Forever. You can trust me.

And she came to him, fully. Her body was a declaration of truth and trust such as no other Kostner had ever known before. She met him on a windswept plain of thought, and he made love to her more completely than he had known any passion before. She joined with him, entered him, mingled with his blood and his thought and his frustration, and he came away clean, filled with glory.

"Yes, I can trust you, I want you, I'm yours," he whispered to her, when they lay side by side in a dream nowhere of mist and soundlessness. "I'm yours."

She smiled, a woman's smile of belief in her man; a smile of trust and deliverance. And Kostner woke up.

The Chief was back on its stand, and the crowd had been penned back by velvet ropes. Several people had played the machine, but there had been no jackpots.

Now Kostner came into the Casino, and the "spotters" got themselves ready. While Kostner had slept, they had gone through his clothes, searching for wires, for gaffs, for spoons or boomerangs. Nothing.

Now he walked straight to the Chief, and stared at it.

Hartshorn was there. "You look tired," he said gently to Kostner, studying the man's weary brown eyes.

"I am, a little," Kostner tried a smile, which didn't work. "I had a funny dream."

"Oh?"

"Yeah . . . about a girl . . ." He let it die off.

Hartshorn's smile was understanding. Pitying, empathtic and understanding. "There are lots of girls in this town. You shouldn't have any trouble finding one with your winnings."

Kostner nodded, and slipped his first silver dollar into the slot. He pulled the handle. The reels spun with a ferocity Kostner had not heard before and suddenly everything went whipping slant-wise as he felt a wrenching of pure flame in his stomach, as his head was snapped on its spindly neck, as the lining behind his eyes was burned out. There was a terrible shriek, of tortured metal, of an express train ripping the air with its passage, of a hundred small animals being gutted and torn to shreds, of incredible pain, of night winds that tore the tops off mountains of lava. And a keening whine of a voice that wailed and wailed and wailed as it went away from there in blinding light—

Free! Free! Heaven or Hell it doesn't matter! Free!

The sound of a soul released from an eternal prison, a genie freed from a dark bottle. And in that instant of damp soundless nothingness, Kostner saw the reels snap and clock down for the final time:

One, two, three. Blue eyes.

But he would never cash his checks.

The crowd screamed through one voice as he fell sidewise and lay on his face. The final lonliness . . .

The Chief was pulled. Bad luck. Too many gamblers resented its

very presence in the Casino. So it was pulled. And returned to the company, with explicit instructions it was to be melted down to slag. And not till it was in the hands of the ladle foreman, who was ready to dump it into the slag furnace, did anyone remark on the final tally the Chief had clocked.

"Look at that, ain't that weird," said the ladle foreman to his bucket man. He pointed to the three glass windows.

"Never saw jackpot bars like that before," the bucket man agreed. "Three eyes. Must be an old machine."

"Yeah, some of these old games go way back," the foreman said, hoisting the slot machine onto the conveyor track leading to the slag furnace.

"Three eyes, huh. How about that. Three brown eyes." And he threw the knife-switch that sent the Chief down the track, to puddle in the roaring inferno of the furnace.

Three brown *eyes.*

Three brown eyes that looked very very weary. That looked very very trapped. That looked very very betrayed. Some of these old games go way back.

Afterword

"THERE ARE ALWAYS THOSE WHO ASK, WHAT IS IT ALL ABOUT?" is the opening sentence of Harlan Ellison's 'Repent, Harlequin!' Said the Ticktockman." Later in the story the Harlequin and Ticktockman have this exchange:

"Scare someone else. I'd rather be dead than live in a dumb world with a bogeyman like you."

"It's my job."

"You're full of it. You're a tyrant. You have no right to order people around and kill them if they show up late."

"You can't adjust. You can't fit in."

"Unstrap me, and I'll fit my fist into your mouth."

"You're a non-conformist."

"That didn't used to be a felony."

"It is now. Live in the world around you."

"I hate it. It's a terrible world."

"I don't, and most of the people I know don't."

And there, encapsulated, is the dilemma. "The world around you," whatever it is, will always attempt to stifle its critics, its writers and artists who attempt to define it. At the same time the critics/non-conformists/artists must continually shift their attention to accomodate the new perimeters of the evils they perceive. Moreover, much of humanity—as the Ticktockman says—is quite satisfied with the way things are.

"Madness is in the eye of the beholder," Ellison says in his note preceding the story, "The Crackpots." The comment not only describes that story, but also the attitudes underlying most of his fictions. He clearly aligns himself with those writers who are disturbed with the insanity wrought in the name of rationality or reality. In stories such as "The Crackpots" and " 'Repent, Harlequin!'

Said the Ticktockman" he reverses the concepts of sanity and insanity, order and chaos. Sanity and order are seen as the madness at the core of the societies of both stories. The apparently insane are sane; the apparent disturber of the orderliness of society is the actual seeker for the return of an acceptable social order. When the knowledge provided by the viscera directly contradicts the so-called truths or realities of the society, one must attempt to expose the falsity behind the truths, the madness behind the realities. If there is any underlying theme to the peripatetic fictions of Harlan Ellison it is that whatever belief one espouses it must be examined thoroughly, even to the point of exposing its weaknesses, even if its theoretical foundations must be destroyed. Ellison's attacks on society are governed by his sense of social criticism, which generally translates into intense anger at the evils he perceives, and by his emotional reactions to the plight of the victimized of this world, concentrating particularly on the pain they senselessly, and sometimes not so senselessly, endure.

> I must cover it all in this olio, everything human,
> Passion and prayer and fear, pleasure, distraction, and rage.
> —from *The First Satire of Juvenal*
> (Rolfe Humphries translation)

It is generally accepted among scholars of satire that two evolutionary lines can be traced from the ancient Rome in which Horatio and Juvenal flourished as principal satirists. Horatio's satires were gently mocking, of the sort that jabs or takes pokes at the subjects they mean to ridicule. Juvenal's were more impassioned, more direct, more often governed by the rage he invokes in the above quote. While aspects of both satirists may be discovered in any satiric work since that time (indeed, some of Horatio's lines are clearly angry; some of Juvenal's quite gentle), most satires have been primarily indebted to the line dating back to one or the other of these Roman satirists. While Swift seemed impelled by a Juvenalian fury, Alexander Pope (except in *The Dunciad*) suffused his poetry with more of a subtle Horatian malice.

In our times, when the word satire has been debased to mean the spoof of the hour on TV, it is often not easy to see a writer as belonging

to either evolutionary satiric line. The influence of Horatio seems predominant in the writings of such as Russell Baker, Art Buchwald, Bernard Malamud, Mary McCarthy, and Aldous Huxley. In the science-fiction field this approach has been used by Damon Knight, Frederik Pohl, C. M. Kornbluth, and others who have mocked human institutions in all kinds of satirical science-fictional extrapolations. Many modern satirists, including Muriel Spark, Joseph Heller, Iris Murdoch, Anthony Burgess, and (especially) Evelyn Waugh, provide strong doses of Juvenalian rage that seethes under the surface placidity of their tales. However, the Juvenalian methods of attack have not been particularly favored by modern satirists, although they have emerged strongly in the novels of Nathanael West and Terry Southern.

A recent movie by Paddy Chayefsky, *Network*, (1977) contained large amounts of Juvenalian diatribe, principally in the TV sermons of the "mad prophet of the airwaves," Howard Beale (played by Peter Finch). In the most typical ploy of satire, these sermons couched the "sane" message of the author in the words of the story's supposedly insane character. Along with John Brunner, Harlan Ellison (interestingly enough, described as the "mad dreamer" on the back cover of the latest edition of *Paingod*) has been the most skilled practitioner of Juvenaliah satiric attack to emerge from the SF field, both in his public utterances and his writings. In *Paingod* and *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream* his need to convey all possible passion, prayer, fear, pleasure, distraction, and rage is as clear in the introductions to the stories as in the stories themselves. As a writer and a member of the human race, he is clearly disturbed by the state of the world and the people who cause and/or allow it. The sense of outrage that such a view initiates is often the wellspring of satire, whether the satirist chooses to take an Horatian approach, a Juvenalian one, or a mixture of both. Ellison's sense of outrage is directly stated and his stories are generally well-wrought examinations of social conditions in dazzling science-fiction contexts.

Science fiction has been an especially receptive medium to the use of satire. Mainstream writers have often borrowed from the field to craft their own satiric works *(A Clockwork Orange, 1984, The Child Buyer, Brave New World, etc).* The satiric target can often be seen more clearly by exactly the kind of extrapolation that is the prime

focus of SF. In fact, the method by which satire is achieved science-fictionally, the transference of the subjects being attacked to another context, has been a basic technique of satire historically. Gulliver is transported to strange faroff lands in order that Swift may attempt to destroy the institutions and mores of 18th-century England. Nathanael West creates a strange gallery of offbeat Hollywood hangers-on in order to attack the emptiness of the American dream. In each case, the transference of the social problems under attack to a milieu different from that in which they are particularly prevalent causes for the reader a dissonance between the grotesquerie evoked in the book and his own very real matter-of-fact existence. When the satire is perceived by the reader, the correspondence between the strange world and his own becomes dramatically evocative. (But only if it is perceived. Missing or avoiding the satire has led to the acceptance of *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) as a pretty adventure tale and West's *The Day of the Locust* (1939) as a realistic novel about the fringe elements of the movie business in the 1930s, without appreciable acknowledgement of its savage attack on America in general. Indeed, its recent cinematic adaptation was notably lacking in the novel's satiric bite.)

Science-fictional extrapolation easily sheds light on social problems by this mere shift of details and events to another time, another world, another dimension, a ship travelling between worlds. Such subjects can be exaggerated or diminished, reshaped and/or extrapolated to absurdity. Except in the more delimited subdivisions of SF, like militaristic space opera and sadomasochistic planetary adventure, it is difficult for the SF writer not to be satiric, in at least incidental matters. Much of science fiction that is not clearly satire has at least some lighthearted jabs at human mores and institutions.

Perhaps more than any other writer developing out of the science-fiction field, Harlan Ellison is able to transfer through extrapolation his intensely felt emotions into objective terms. In fact, the reader can generally gauge the extent of this transference since Ellison provides the emotional sources of the stories in his invective filled introductions to them. There is often a nagging didactic tone to these little essays that is rarely found in the stories themselves. No matter how well turned the phrases in the introductory sections, the

points are better made in the dramatic and imaginative terms of the narratives.

"**Paingod**" is a brilliant example of Ellison's genius at transferring deeply felt emotion to a controlled narrative. Instead of wallowing in the question of what sort of god could allow human suffering, or debating the age-old philosophical rationales, he imagines just the sort of god who can dispense pain easily, an unanthropomorphic deity to whom the job is just a job. The characterization of the paingod as a genuine alien is a striking achievement—one that, further, allows Ellison to consider the question that is his theme with objectivity and directness. Trente, the paingod, is responsible not just for the suffering of humankind, but to him falls "the forever task of dispensing pain and sorrow to the myriad multitudes of creatures that inhabited the universes". By removing the god even further from our world than conventional mythologies usually allow, and making the god's purveyance of pain merely an "attention to duty" Ellison achieves a finely detailed perspective, not to mention a skillful allegory.

The growing awareness of the dimensions of pain causes in the "soulless, emotionless, regimented" paingod the sickness of concern. An interesting turnabout is effected: the god must experience pain in order to relieve his own torment.

> What is this torment? What is this unpleasant, unhappy, unrelenting feeling that gnaws at me, tears at me, corrupts my thoughts, colors darkly my every desire? Am I going mad?

The displacement of the theme from the sufferers to the force causing their pain is illustrative of the kind of technique utilized by Ellison in the examination of human or social problems. Instead of portraying the suffering through human eyes, as in more realistic literary traditions, he inflicts the god with the pain, a transference by which he brings the subject into a sharper focus. Humankind, after all, is generally inured to its suffering; for Trente emotion of any kind is new. In order to understand pain fully, however, he must experience it as a member of a race within his vast dominion. In the body of the stricken artist Colin Marshack, he feels the pain that has formerly tormented him in the abstract.

It left itself wide open, flung itself wide open, to what tremors governed man. And Trente felt the full impact of the pain he so lightly dispensed to all the living things in the universes. It was potent hot all! And it was a further knowing, a greater knowledge, a simple act that the sickness had compelled him to undertake.

The knowledge to which Trente comes is Keatsian in nature ("For without pain there can be no pleasure.") Pain, "the most important thing in the universes", leads to beauty—or, as it is stated eloquently in the story:

"It is a grey and a lonely place in which we live, all of us, swinging between desperation and emptiness and all that makes it worthwhile is caring, is beauty. But if there was no opposite for beauty, if there was no opposite for pleasure, it would all turn to dust, to waste."

While the question of human suffering still remains, as it must, Ellison's allegorical rendering of it makes a profound plea for concern—not just from the paingod but from ourselves. Thus, the fictional god is also a stand-in for the readers of the story who, if they are not moved by it, are themselves suffering from an intellectual objectivity not unlike that of the paingod's.

The lack of concern that leads to conformism and a codified society is Ellison's subject in what is perhaps his most perfectly realized story, " **'Repent, Harlequin!' said the Ticktockman.**" Taking his cue from Thoreau and a quote from the Civil Disobedience essay, Ellison pictures graphically a society in which the mass of men serve the state as machines in its service. The ordinary tyranny of time, the pressures of time which we all feel whether or not we respond to its actual and implied schedules, is extrapolated into a social system that is itself tyrannical in its unreasonable requirement that its citizens hold rigidly to schedule or have years lopped off their lifetimes. As in all tyrannies, whether small or large, important areas of individualism are lost and the Harelquin bas become dangerous simply because

He had become a *personality,* something they had filtered out of the system many decades before. But there it was and there *he* was, a very definitely imposing personality. In certain circles—middle-class circles—it was thought disgusting.

While the Harlequin stands for the last remaining vestige of indi-

vidualism, the Ticktockman represents the indifference of society to individual needs. He is the machine that governs the operation of the other machines.

Ellison, in this story, attacks present day society through his skillfully constructed extrapolation. In one particularly well wrought paragraph he encapsulizes our submission to the tyranny of time.

> And so it goes. And so it goes. And so it goes. And so it goes goes goes goes goes tick tock tick tock tick tock and one day we no longer let time serve us, we serve time and we are slaves of the schedule, worshippers of the sun's passing; bound into a life predicated on restrictions because the system will not function if we don't keep the schedule tight.

The major attack of the story is, of course, not against time or even the personal organization of it. It does not matter that Harlan Ellison is always late, as he says in his introductory comments. What does matter is that people are faced at each juncture of life with forces that attempt to keep them in line, to make them conform to whatever popular social or political structure is in vogue at that time. People who are consistently late violate small matters of etiquette that are essentially vestigial, and no degree of fretting from the offended parties covers the fact that their disturbance is directed at concern for form and not concern for the individual. (One could perhaps argue that the latecomer shows a similar lack of concern; either way the nerves of both the scheduled and unscheduled are jangled by what is essentially a set of social presumptions based on time.) Whether to a questionable system of etiquette or an entire social structure derived from the organization of time—or, for that matter, the organization of *anything* designed to keep humankind in line—the demand to conform should not be accepted mindlessly, as those in the Ticktockman's society have done.

All college bull sessions about the need to conform in some situations aside, the opposition between the individual thinker and those who would govern him changes only by degree from century to century. Just as the mass of men willing to conform to 19th-century society disturbed Henry David Thoreau, the conformities of mid-20th-century bother Harlan Ellison. As social critics both depict the machinelike mass of men with compassion. Instead of condemning them for not being individualistic, both writers see them as people

who simply do not realize the dimensions of their submission. Individuals, especially those seen by the state as its enemies, can at least make the rest of society aware of the demands being made by whatever system is controlling their behavior. In " 'Repent Harlequin!' Said the Ticktockman" Ellison has achieved an important goal of the satirist: to attack the institutions of society with a perceptive exaggeration of certain important facts of the systems which govern them. The demands of time are annoyances; mindless conformism is a tangible evil.

In certain other stories he explores some different aspects of the individual vs. state conflict. The apparent maniacs in "**The Crackpots**" are nonconformists against the superior reasoning of an intergalactic power.

> They lived in a world of no standardization, no conformity at all. There was no way to gauge the way these people would act, as you could with the Kyben of the stars. It was—it was— well, *insane!*

In "The Crackpots" Ellison employs what is possibly the satirist's best formula for describing graphically the individual's resistance to the tyranny of a system—the supposedly insane are really the sane who are fighting against the insanity of the supposedly sane. (See also Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, 1961, and Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, 1962). Ellison is also perceptive enough to include the variation of the actually insane individual who is nevertheless able to perceive the dimensions of social insanity even more clearly than the other crackpots.

The more cynical, perhaps because more recently written, "**Sleeping Dogs**" (1974—added to the revised edition of *Paingod* by the author) presents a similar conflict between the more advanced thinker and the unreasonable militarist whose "blind servitude to cause was the most loathsome aspect of his character." The diseased people of "**The Discarded**" and Gunnderson in "**Deeper than the Darkness**" are all individuals who, in their roles as pariahs, are nevertheless being used by the very society which has originally isolated them. The discarded, in attempting to cooperate with the groups who beg for help in the name of sanctioned higher ideals, kill off their Harlequin and encounter the double-cross of a society who would prefer for them to suffer in loneliness instead of living isolated

on the same planet. For Gunnderson, his manipulation by representatives of his conforming society leads him to an important insight about himself: "He had discovered he had character, and that he was not a hopeless, oddie hulk, doomed to die wasted. He found he had a future." He is able to escape the domination of his manipulators in a way the Harlequin never could, becoming—interestingly enough—a Harlequin-like figure who takes the name of "The Minstrel."

Bergman, the hero of "**Wanted in Surgery,**" conquers the absurdities of his mechanistic system by attacking it directly instead of getting away from it or submerging himself in it. The title character of "**Bright Eyes**" is a stoical observer of the doom of humankind, and the causes behind it. "So Bright Eyes—never Man—was the last man on Earth. Keeper of a silent graveyard; echoless tomb monument to the foolishness, the absurdity, of nobility." The satirist and/or social critic is a similar guardian, attacker of human folly and absurdity, and also seeker and celebrator of what is noble in humankind.

The bitterest of the Ellison stories which focus upon a Harlequin-Ticktockman kind of conflict is "**I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream.**" In his introductory comment he says that the time from which this story derives is a lightless, bitter period of "compassionate cynicism." He refers briefly to the method of transferring intensely subjective feelings into narrative form when he describes the Ellison who "turns the pain to fiction in the storyteller's alchemy, and the value of moments, in that special place of anguish comes out as sometimes stories."

"I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream" resembles the *Paingod* stories in its pitting of a rebel against the system which is forcing its minions to conform. In this story, however, the idea of conformity is not at issue. The five characters trapped by AM, the worldwide computer system, would be only too eager to conform if given the proper opportunity. Instead, they are given a shifting landscape that either does not provide opportunity to conform or, more often, changes the perimeters of its dictated conformity as soon as the characters realize them and try to do what they think AM wants. There is no system for the quintet of sufferers to comprehend; there is only the system's self-gratification designed to discomfort and brutalize the world's remaining humans: "the machine masturbated and we had to take it or die." Even though the story was written in the

sixties, it anticipates the mood of the seventies, in that the only recourse open to its bemused characters is survival in the face of a world that has become too mechanistically complex for the old solution of simple conformity. The satiric message of this cautionary tale is almost too painful to consider. If the systems provide only punishment for action, whether the action is of a positive or negative nature, there is no reasonable solution for the individual with higher aspirations. There is only survival, only the kind of masturbatory self-gratification that is a delimited human goal. In the seventies, characterized rather blatantly as "The Me Decade" by a prominent media analyst, people are satisfying themselves by mimicking the example of the masturbating machines and systems that senselessly hold powers not granted them by the individuals over whom they hold sway. The vision of this story is more terrifying than Sartre's *No Exit* depiction of hell in which, according to the famous last line, "Hell is other people." In Ellison's version, itself a narrative for which Sartre's title would not be inappropriate, the hell that is other people seems at one remove from the senseless cruelty brought about by a system that is no longer even a definable object for direct and logical attack. The pessimism of Ellison's view in "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream" is harrowing and, if not always easy to accept (I resist the bleakness of both his and Sartre's view of the world), it is a genuine extrapolation of what is now present in the world. The role of the satirist is often to provide the signposts to danger in as exaggerated a manner as his perspective permits. In this way the satirist and the science fiction writer are often neatly dovetailed—both concerned with not showing what is, but what might be if human folly (or wisdom) is allowed free rein.

Even in "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream," bitter as it is, there is a light of sorts. When all the logical forms of rebellion against an uncomprehending force have been exhausted, there is still the illogical rebellion or the rebellion for the sake of rebellion. AM is not all-powerful, and there is one option open for the humans to use to defeat it. As the narrator says, "Surrounded by madness, surrounded by hunger, surrounded by everything but death, I knew death was our only way out." While murder and suicide freed four of the five trapped people in this story, that of course would be too nihilistic a solution for similar complexities in present-day society. The message

I receive from the protagonist's climactic actions is that any rebellion is preferable to no rebellion at all. It is, perhaps, very much a message of the late 1960s, a time in which few philosophical rationales were offered for the actual events of rebellion. The act of rebellion itself became a prod to considering the deficiencies of whatever was being attacked. While some of the battles of that time are still being fought, albeit in a diminished way, we in the post-Watergate era are still in a questioning, if not a particularly rebellious mood. (That may seem overly optimistic on my part, but then I don't much believe in the Me Decade either.) The solution of "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream" may not be feasible as such—the encouragement of death as a way out, anyway—but the suggestion of rebellion at all costs is provocative. Also, it helps to relieve the desperate overtones of the story.

However, the final section of "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream" in which the condition of the title is fulfilled, is at least as bleak as Sartre's. The payment for the protagonist's rebellion is awesome and, as a statement of the impotence of what was once popularly called the human condition, it is devastating. In the extremity of a superbly imagined exaggeration, the state to which the protagonist is reduced portrays evocatively the kind of impotence we all feel, at least at certain important intervals of our life. For a moment it does not matter whether Ellison's pessimism is too much for us—underneath it all he has touched chords that affect all of us.

The stories in the *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream* collection are generally more pessimistic than those in *Paingod and Other Delusions*. The main characters of "**Big Sam Was My Friend,**" "**Eyes of Dust,**" and "**Delusion for a Dragon Slayer**" find only death ending their doomed quests. "Eyes of Dust," particularly, offers an intriguing contrast to "Paingod." The paingod at least found something hopeful in the contemplation of beauty, but the actual beauties of "Eyes of Dust" are repelled by anything that is not beautiful: "Beauty seeks its level, as does ugliness. As do pariahs." The implication of the story is that, at least in some forms, beauty is an empty illusion like all the other illusions that dominate human action. The protagonist of "Delusion for a Dragon Slayer" cannot even succeed in that area where most of us believe success is possible, in dreams. In the rather arid conclusion of the story, Ellison writes, "a man may truly live in

his dreams, his noblest dreams, but only, *only* if he is worthy of those dreams." "**World of the Myth**" seems even bleaker, as its most despicable character is forced to confront his own reality.

> "He killed himself because the ants showed him what he was. What he really was. As much truth as a man can stand and then some. They showed him the essence of himself."

At the end of the story there is offered the possibility that the protagonist might reach a similar fate if he could also be shown the essence of himself. It is possible, the story seems to say, that we would all suffer similarly if we could be confronted with our own realities. All in all, the stories in *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream* have in them fewer glimpses of the nobility or potential of humankind than do those in *Paingod,* in which beauty is at least possible, harlequins can disrupt the system importantly before being defeated, crackpots can perform their clandestine rebellion with vigor, dedicated men can even *defeat* the limited systems, and misfits can discover their own identity together with a chance for escape from domination. The significant note of difference is struck in the last lines of "World of the Myth":

> He went away from her, then; he went to lie down, hoping there was a future, but doubting it; really doubting it.

Compare that to Gunnderson's vision of future in "Deeper Than the Darkness." In fact, the future seems bleak for all the survivors of the stories in *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream.* Survival becomes even a questionable goal.

In stories that are not particularly embedded with satire or social criticism, Ellison still uses a process of fictional transference (or, to use his word for it, alchemy) to dramatize his themes. "**Lonely Ache,**" for example, translates the intensely personal experience of a marital splitup into a fantasy creation that has more dramatic effect than would pages of post-breakup self-pitying. The loneliness beast growing in the corner of the protagonist's room is artfully imagined. Not only is it a powerful symbol of the man's loneliness, it is an effective representation of the way we push, or try to push, our pain

away from us, into corners of our mind. No matter how much we try to ignore the pain, it remains, gnawing at us until we confront it or capitulate to it. The way the loneliness beast affects the protagonist is enormously provocative, and the end of the story has an effect on the reader that is equivalent to the effect of similar events in J. D. Salinger's "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," John O'Hara's *Appointment in Samarra* (1934), and Louis Malle's 1963 film *The Fire Within.* Ellison is not being improperly immodest when, in his introductory comment, he claims "Lonely Ache" as one of his best stories.

"**Pretty Maggie Moneyeyes**" is a personal favorite of mine among Ellison's tales. In this well characterized narrative he makes poignantly dramatic a central plight of our times: the loss of identity in an increasingly mechanized society that is well on its way to soullessness. Especially striking is Ellison's use of the story's focal metaphor. He portrays Maggie as a machinelike woman ("*An operable woman, a working mechanism, a rigged and sudden machinery of softness and motivation*" *whose soul is transferred* into a slot machine. Again Ellison uses a transference to dramatize his main theme. Along the way he makes an important statement about the mechanistic ways of our society.

The story works especially well in the presentation of the character of Maggie. She is a machine even before her death, one who has analyzed society's demands for a beautiful and successful woman, and then constructed herself to fulfill those demands. At 23, she is "*a determined product of Miss Clairol and Berlitz, a dream-image formed by* Vogue *and intimate association with the rat race.*" *Ellison details her life with such clarity that, in spite of the mechanistic metaphor–"A chromium instrument, something never pitted by rust and corrosion"* —she is a vividly realized character. Her conformity to a set of false ideals is the seed of her entrapment. Maggie's soul inside the machine has always, in a way, been the essential Maggie—a mechanized soul dedicated to acquisitive goals. The final sections of the story, in which her dream-self treats Kostner the way she treated men in life, using the facade of emotion to achieve her freedom, are particularly effective because of the skill with which Ellison has earlier portrayed her and established the mechanistic metaphor. On the satiric level, the story suggests the wider field of

illusions which threaten to drain away all human identity. For a very small cost we can transfer our own souls to the various machines of ambition, luxury, or a properly scheduled life. In that respect, "Pretty Maggie Moneyeyes" is not appreciably different from " 'Repent, Harlequin!' said the Ticktockman." Both stories are about the hardships of affecting the mechanisms that threaten to absorb human passion; eventually, Maggie and the Harlequin are both destroyed by these social mechanisms.

A theme present in several of the stories, and reiterated in most of Ellison's introductions, is the importance of the rebel in any situation, whether it be personal, social, or political; whether against another person, a machine, a social organism, or himself. Free spirits battle structured societies, brilliant surgeons risk all to destroy mechanistic surrogates, a psychic misfit asserts himself against conformic parapsychics, the ultimate rebel murders to save others from a menacing computer system. Even where it is not obviously present, the theme of rebellion is often implied. The paingod, by studying suffering, is conducting his own rebellion against his attention to duty. The protagonist of "Lonelyache" is looking for a way out of the emotional morass he has fallen into. Even Maggie Moneyeyes puts up her own battle to escape entrapment and risk encountering the hell that may be beyond. The need for rebellion, or at least striking out against the people and systems that threaten to enslave us, is one consistent aspect of most of Ellison's fiction. Whatever ideas or philosophies form the structure of our lives, we are all potentially in the position of man against the machine, against other madmen, against the tyranny of emotions, against the gods, against other men—essentially, then, in the position of the Harlequin against the Ticktockman. Like most satirists/social critics Ellison asks us to examine our lives and define the borders of human folly and absurdity.

> He withdrew murmuring *to hell with you.*
> And added, brightly, *but then you're there, aren't you.*
> —"I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream"

There are times, moments when fighting the battle against the threatening darkness, seems too much of a strain. The writer/battler

questions the value of the attack, as when Ellison parenthetically comments in his new introduction to *Paingod:*

> That's evil: only the human predator destroys slowly, any decent hunting animal rips out the throat and feeds, and that's that. The more I see of people, the better I like animals.

Underlining such a statement is the wish of the warrior to leave the field. He has perhaps fought against chaos long enough, railed against human folly for too long, replaced a sense of outrage with still another sense of outrage. The processes of satire and/or social criticism generally lead to frustration. For every Dickens whose work manages to influence some change in the social fabric, there are hundreds of Nathanael Wests whose writings are basically uninfluential because the conditions which concern them never seem appreciably to change. Even when a gain is made in, say, child labor laws or American civil rights, one must continue to do battle against the humans whose venality, cruelty, or overriding ambition cause them to erect obstacles to the smooth effecting of such revolutionary change. There are powerful lobbyists everywhere in every century who are for what decent and moral people are against. The selfish Romans against whom Juvenal ranted, the artistic clods that angered Pope, the exemplars of human folly that drew Swift's wrath have been reincarnated as the hateful people and empty human beings in all walks of life that provoke the anger of such modern writers as Ellison, West, and Waugh.

The corporate state, today's favorite satiric target, is essentially no different from the industrial state or the Imperial Roman state. The system changes, but not the folly and absurdity with which the system is run, around which it is organized. Outside and within the system are its victims, and it is for these victims that the emotions of such as Juvenal, Pope, Swift, Dickens, Thoreau, West, and Ellison are engaged. Their favorite themes are inequity and iniquity, unfairness, and the cruelties of the indifferent or vengeful dynamos whose power is used to keep victims aligned properly.

The fight seems never-ending. No wonder the artist is tempted to draw back, tempted to leave the battlefield to the human predators and their victims—as Ellison suggest in his parenthetical comment. Lately, however, Ellison has been centering on the human predators

and the animals, particularly in stories like "The Whimper of Whipped Dogs" (1973) and "The Deathbird." (1975). Whatever subjects he chooses to bring into sharp focus fictionally, he continues to write perceptive fantasy and science fiction stories that are as dramatically effective as they are thought-provoking.

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